

IN QUEST OF PERIL

ALFRED JUDD

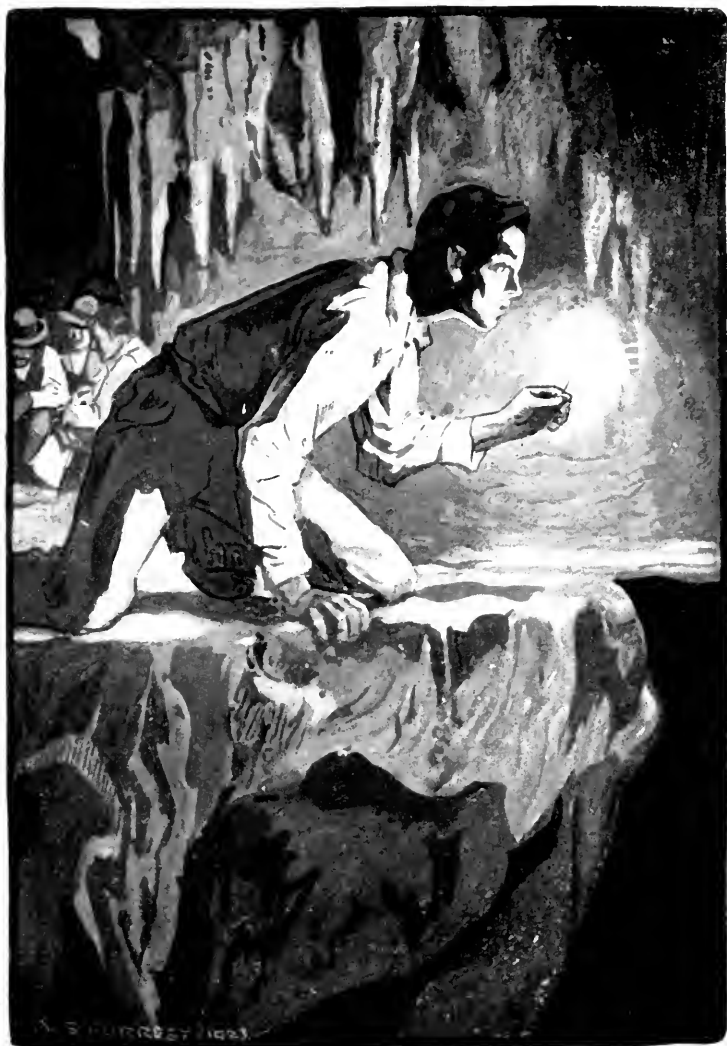


J. Edwards.

"The Hollies"

Fisberton

Mr Lincoln



(2,411)

Beneath his chin now was a spiral chasm (p. 319).

IN QUEST OF PERIL

BEING THE THRILLING ADVENTURES OF
MAJOR BRAND, HIS SON DICK, AND
TRUSTY TIM O'FLANNEL IN ALL
PARTS OF THE WORLD

BY
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"TODDY SCORES AGAIN," "THE LUCK OF
THE LENNITES," ETC.

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PZ
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J881L

"Something hidden. Go and find it.
Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges,
Lost and waiting for you. Go!"

KIPLING.



CONTENTS

QUEST

I. THE GOLDEN IRA (Brazil)	II
II. THE KEG OF PEARLS (China Seas) . . .	38
III. THE PRISONER OF KAAR ZHARTA (Morocco)	59
IV. KWALI'S TREASURE (New Guinea) . . .	86
V. THE REPAL IVORIES (England)	115
VI. THE RIVER OF TIBET (Burmese Border) .	137
VII. THE PREY OF THE WEED (Sargasso Sea)	166
VIII. OLD GASPARD'S GOLD (Klondike) . . .	199
IX. HANG LOO THE PIRATE (Gulf of Siam) .	223
X. THE CRYSTAL GODS (Scotland)	251
XI. THE JEWELLED QUETZAL (Costa Rica) .	285
XII. THE CAPTIVE OF SWAMP ISLAND (Fiji) .	305

IN QUEST OF PERIL

QUEST ONE

THE GOLDEN IRA

“ANY QUEST or ENTERPRISE, however perilous, undertaken in any wild part of the world. Apply to Adventurer, 7 Stuart Mansions, Bayswater, W., or to Broadlands, Suffolk.”

When Dr. Kennison, the grey-haired old medico, first lighted upon this paragraph, he jumped so much that he nearly jumped off his spectacles. Reaching for the telephone, he rang up, and waited with drumming fingers.

“Is that 7 Stuart Mansions?”

“Correct,” answered a deep, full-chested voice.

“I wish to speak with the gentleman who has advertised in this morning’s *Times* to the effect that he is willing to take up any quest, however dangerous, in any wild part——”

“ Yes, I am that man. To whom have I the pleasure of talking ? ”

“ I am Kennison, the optical specialist, of Harley Street. And you ? ”

“ My name is Brand. Let me explain. I was a major in the Indian army, but, owing to a damaged left shoulder, I was obliged to retire early in life. Being a widower with only one son—the latter a boy at Eton—I amused myself by globe-trotting. We Brands were always wanderers in savage places, and I believe we always shall be. I’m off again soon ; but now, to improve the flavour, I should like to have some object in view——”

“ Well, I can furnish you with an object—a noble object—and I am eager to meet you without delay. Will you call upon me, or——”

“ I will be with you in half an hour.”

Major Brand was as good as his word. He brought with him into the sober consulting-room a fine atmosphere of force and vitality. He was a gaunt, well-groomed man, with wisps of grizzled white in his hair and moustache. There were scars on his cheeks and hands, while his broad back appeared to be out of straight owing to a slight droop of the left shoulder. The Major was not alone. He was accompanied by a loose-limbed youth of perhaps eighteen, a less battered replica of himself.

“ My boy Dick,” announced he bluffly, with a jerk of the elbow. “ A chip of the old block, I suppose ; anyhow, his heart is already across the seas. So, between school and college, I’m going to give him a little jaunt. Wherever my next track lies, he shall be there as well. But now, doctor—to business.”

Dr. Kennison, from a shelf on his desk, took out a small cardboard box, producing therefrom a dried piece of herb, having five or six serrated leaves on a slender stalk. These leaves were of a vividly yellow tinge, honey-combed in the softer parts, and with veins of purplish green.

“ This,” announced he, “ is a stem of the golden ira—a species quite unknown to European botany. Ira, I think, is a jungle name meaning ‘ honey.’ I received a bunch of it from my old friend Honnell, who died of malaria while exploring one of the Amazon’s lesser-known tributaries. Honnell had never met with this queer herb before ; but apparently the Indians of that region knew it, and they believed that by rubbing the juice of it into their eyes they could safeguard themselves from blindness. Remembering that I was an eye specialist, Honnell packed up a box of the stuff, and managed to have it dispatched. You follow me ? ”

The Major nodded.

"This herb, on reaching me, was in such a bone-dry state that I had small hope of extracting any properties from it. However, I set about the attempt, and managed to obtain a phial of yellowish liquid with a sharp, acrid smell. I was without any real faith in the matter, and was a trifle uncertain how best to experiment. However I solved that point at last, with truly amazing results. The ira, I found, acted upon the optic centres as a sort of stimulant, and a purblind patient, after five days' treatment, was completely restored to sight."

"Ha! And the effect remained permanent?"

"Quite. But, of course, I had not enough of the plant to carry my investigations to a conclusive issue. What I require is five or six good-sized sacks of the stuff. Given those to experiment with, I should soon be able to tell the world what ira is really worth. I want some one to visit Brazil and bring me home as much golden ira as he can find."

"Ha! And where exactly is he going to look for it? Have you definite particulars on that point?"

"Unfortunately, no. But here is a detailed map of the middle Amazon. I heard from poor Honnell from time to time, and,

guided by his letters, I have traced the journey I suppose him to have taken. At the moment of plucking the ira he seems to have been encamped on a tiny plateau ten miles due north of the Rio Coati."

"Then the Rio Coati is our means of approach?"

"No. That river, I fear, is hardly navigable. You must know that I have talked this project well over with Professor Heesh, the Austrian naturalist, who was in London a month since. Hearing that he was about to re-start for South America, I drove to his hotel and urged him to undertake a search for the plant. But Heesh disappointed me. On hearing of the ira's astounding properties he could see nothing but the commercial side of my discovery. 'We shall both be rich men,' he cried, and made so many sordid conditions that I quite lost patience. Finally we parted, and the most I gleaned from him was that the Rio Coati had ever baffled all voyagers, and that the spot marked on my map was deep in the core of impassable jungle."

Major Brand smiled. "A somewhat daunting prospect," he observed.

"Indeed, yes. But there would be no stint in fitting out your expedition, while I and my colleagues would allow a liberal fee in the

event of its turning up trumps. However, think the proposal well over. If——”

“My good sir,” laughed the Major, “I am delighted to accept without any more parley. Eh, Dick?”

“Rather!” declared Dick heartily. “This looks like being great!”

A night encampment in the Amazon jungle—a scene of sleep but not of quietude. Mosquitoes hummed in the fire-glow, being aided in their venomous chant by the piping whistle of cicadas and locusts. These, and other pests like them, kept Dick Brand in a state of mild torment as he stood on watchful guard. Dick found his vigil a nervy business, for there was real awe in the thought that some leagues of primeval forest, most of it untrodden by the foot of man, encircled him on every side. No amiable forest either, but one full of slinking mystery and shrill, disquieting sound.

The dew-drenched underscrub was never for one second still, and once a lean, tawny body had sidled through the folds of a trailing vine. It had the shape of a puma or a jaguar, Dick could not be certain which, for the creature had bounded away in a trice, by far the more flustered of the two, and Dick’s ward was next disturbed by an ear-splitting roll of

notes which broke from the growth over Tim O'Flannel's head. Tim—a trusty bodyguard of the Major—started with such effect that he pitched clean out of the hammock.

“Glory be to us!” gasped the Irishman, scrambling to his knees, “an’ was that yourself, Masther Dick? Did ye sound the alarm, then?”

Dick laughed softly. “Ssh,” whispered he; “there’s no call to arouse the others. That was only a howler—nocturnal monkey, y’know—quite jolly little brutes in their way; and this one has served a useful purpose, for I was just about to rattle you up.”

“Shure, an’ is it my turn to be on dooty?”

“Yes, and you’ll be wise to pile up plenty of fuel. Ugh! a plague on these insects! I’m a mass of bites.”

Handing his gun to the other, Dick climbed into a hammock, and was asleep in two twinkles of an eyelid.

A changed scene greeted the boy’s gaze when next he awoke, for burning sunshine then lighted the glade, revealing all its wealth of colour. Toucans, parrots, yellow orioles, and yet more gorgeous birds gambolled in the boughs above, while an appetizing smell of freshly cooked fish came wafting to his nostrils. The Indians, early astir, had been full busy.

Besides the fish there were turtle's eggs for breakfast, and a liberal portion of farina for every man.

Major Brand, with the aid of map and instruments, had been marking out his course. "I am resolved, so far as possible," he said to Matapo, "to strike a direct line for my object, preferring rather to hack a way over difficult ground than to embark on tiresome and puzzling detours."

The old guide nodded. "Obstacles, Señor," replied he quietly, "cannot be avoided now. We have entered the thick belt, where paths are not. It is best to push onward ere the sun rides high. You are ready, Señor?"

"Quite."

The machete-men then went ahead with their keen-edged weapons, contriving for a while to play sufficient havoc in the twine of thickets to maintain a gradual march. Purple passion-flowers with leathery stems, long strands of creeping fern, the meshes of multi-coloured orchis—all these in turn succumbed to a single skilful slash.

But the going became more and more terrible. Rib-like roots of trees, strung high above a loamy soil, and masked by mazy vegetation, kept every one of them staggering, while now and again a patch of bog was reached, or a narrow, wedge-like gully. Danger was ever

present, for the exotic leafage that lashed their faces was a-quiver with hostile life. Huge bird-catching spiders, black and hairy, tumbled at their feet, while several reptiles were seen, including a fearsome anaconda. This enormous creature went sliding off a low branch into a thicket of dead palm, its exit being accompanied by a hissing of rage and fear.

As the ground took an upward trend, the checks became yet more numerous, and at times the party, stranded shoulder deep in trees of fern and giant scrub, were faced by such a dense wall of bosage that a week of axe-work might not have worn it down. The Indians, drenched with sweat despite their absence of clothing, began to show signs of sullen reluctance; but Major Brand had a short way of dealing with shirkers. Taking a machete himself, he came to the brunt of the battle, bidding Matapo worm hither and thither till some vulnerable point was descried.

The next hour was a desperate conflict with nature—more particularly with a species of climbing palm, armed with hooked spines, which knit every bush and tree into a sort of barbed entanglement. Once through this, the going again became tolerable, with sunlit spaces decked with magnificent flowers and clamouring with wild folk.

A tapir was sighted, several ant-eaters, and whole hosts of monkeys. The noisy antics of the latter were comical to a degree, while macaws, barbets, and bell-birds added their notes to the varying concert. Tim O'Flannel and Dick gaped at the enchantment around them, but Major Brand, who now sighted the crest of the climb, was too otherwise excited to pay any passing heed.

"This may be the end!" he cried. "This may be the end!"

That brought the others to attention and enlivened their pace, Dick's eyes being especially eager for some sign of the elusive plant they sought. But he looked in vain, and, topping the rise, Major Brand's hopes were also dashed. This was no plateau at all; it was merely a broken, crystalline ridge dropping sharply into more jungle.

"Whew!" panted he, throwing off a sombrero to mop his glistening brow. "There is more to be done yet, but I guess we have all earned rest and refreshment. Come, my lads, have you anything fit to eat?"

There was food in plenty. Two brace of wild duck, shot on the previous day and cooked over their encampment fire, were now brought forth for the feast. As for the drink question, that was solved on the spot by Matapo, who,

armed with a light axe, attacked a straight, lofty tree which grew but a few yards off. Other Indians ran up with some pannikins which O'Flannel had just unstrapped.

"It's a masseranduba," explained Major Brand; "a milk tree. See, the cream is flowing freely from those notches just cut. Good! That's capital stuff—almost as right as cow's milk."

"Faith, an' what a happy land this is!" murmured O'Flannel, who, like all his fellows, was torn, scratched, and bedraggled. "A dairy in a tree-trunk! Lucky Oi am to be here, sor, an' Oi wish Oi'd brought the missus!"

The Major laughed aloud, for O'Flannel's good cheer in adversity was as welcome as a tonic. Tim's humour, unfortunately, was not shared by the natives, for they ate their food with lowering looks and with darkling glances at that range of jungle opposite. The repast being done, they sought the shade of some cecropias, about fifty yards away, where, instead of taking their usual siesta, they engaged in a stealthy confab. This, presently, was explained by Matapo.

"What will be the Señor's next command?" inquired he. "Is he now well pleased to return?"

"Return!" barked Major Brand. "My
(2,411)

good Matapo, there can be no such word till I have succeeded in my design. Our mission lies straight ahead."

Matapo's coppery skin showed a slight pallor. "Señor, it is impossible; the others will not set foot in yonder valley."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because it is the Valley of Evil. They call it *muíto mal*, which is 'very bad.' No good thing lives there, and no man who walks therein may hope to come out alive. Nor may we well avoid it, for it bends like a mighty bow from river to river."

"But what's the matter with the place?"

"It is said to be the haunt of Jurupari, who is the god of all evil. So our men refuse to approach it."

"Nonsense! Come, you must talk them over."

"I have already tried, Señor, but in vain. Not even a beating would make them obey. That was tried before, and by a white man, who sought the same plant as yourself."

"What!" cried Major Brand, now very much alert. "Has some one else been hunting the golden ira?"

"So I am told, Señor."

"What was he called?"

"The sound of his name was like Heesh."

“Heesh ! By Jove !” The Major exchanged a meaning glance with Dick, who nodded back. Both remembered clearly that Professor Heesh, an Austrian naturalist, was the very man who had failed to make terms with Dr. Kennison. “What became of this Heesh ?” queried the Major sharply.

“I cannot tell, Señor. I never saw him ; but Bacti, one of our own machete-men, states that he was a member of the Heesh band. Bacti, on refusing to enter the evil valley, was first beaten and then shot at ; but he managed to escape, and he vows that he will never cross this ridge.”

“And they all say the same ?”

“Yes, but Bacti is the most obstinate. Let us again hear what he says.”

Bacti, however, had seized a chance to slip clean away, and only seven trembling natives remained to meet Major Brand as he stalked over to parley.

“Tell them,” said the Major to Matapo, “that we are carrying a fine flask of chacto, and that this shall be divided among them as soon as the valley is behind us. See if that will hearten them up.”

It did—amazingly. Chacto, a raw preparation of cane rum, is such a weakness with the Amazon Indian that, in the common way, it

is best kept afar off ; but it has its uses when other blandishments fail. One by one these awe-stricken, mutinous fellows surrendered, and, packs being re-shouldered, a new beginning was made forthwith. Trudging down the rock-strewn slope, they all plunged into the sinister shades beyond.

The explorer's nostrils were at once smitten by a hot, musky odour whose origin it was impossible to discover, but its existence was real and aggressive, becoming worse and worse as they pressed on. Only scorpions, centipedes, and the like made a home in this brackish depression. Gaunt, misshapen limbs interlocked overhead, and after the first hundred yards the undercover showed signs of wilting, and then of a soft decay. The moist *débris* underfoot gave place to slime, and then to a hideous black bog. This, in places, reached well above the ankles, and clogged their every step.

The place was aptly named, and its stifling odours were now such that the white men could scarcely breathe. For sake of discipline they had to remain outwardly staunch, though a dizziness began to assail them and a horrible sense of nausea.

The twilight was intense. Major Brand could scarce be certain whether they maintained

a direct course or not. But escape was the paramount thought, and he fought on with clenched teeth, as a drowning man fights for land.

Sunlight at last ! A dazzling shaft pierced the gloom ahead, and once more there was a hardy bush to be cut and trampled aside. Fallen trees were now swathed in peppers, shining arums, and other gay parasites. Then they staggered out of the pit into God-given, cleaner air, sinking upon a smiling breadth of campo to drink in new life. They had survived the dire ordeal, yet were given no time to discuss it, for Dick uplifted his voice in a ringing cry,—

“ Look ! Look ! ” was his sharp outburst. “ See, there it is—the golden ira ! ”

The golden ira !

Major Brand, Tim O’Flannel, and many of the Indians stumbled to their feet. The campo upon which they had issued was studded by little islets of trees, known as ilhas, and on the fringe of the nearest clump there shone a tussock of brilliant yellow. It was, in very truth, the golden ira.

No more thought of resting after that ! The prize was eagerly garnered, and the whole party thrown out in open order to scout for more. A vain, perspiring hour sped by with-

out further gain, but then a lofty pile of volcanic rock suddenly rose to their vision, upstanding between the eternal forest and a small shimmering lake. As they came nigh to this they beheld more of the ira, thriving in crevices of the cliff itself.

"This may be the famous plateau," cried Dick. "Somehow we must scale it, but we'll have a tough job, I guess!"

Tough it was, but not so bad as to baffle them, and they attained a grassy summit just as the short-lived dusk was fading into night. But they had triumphed, for the tiny tableland on which they stood was thickly dotted over with a green-veined leafage of honey-combed gold.

How they toiled! though, indeed, quite a brief period sufficed to gather in so limited a harvest. The hammock nets, being outspread, were promptly converted into makeshift bags, by which means they were able to bear their spoil to the lower level.

A fire was kindled by the lake side, and, while supper was being prepared by Tim O'Flannel and Dick, the Indians, under Matapo, set willingly about to collect slats of bamboo. These, with the aid of elastic creepers, were cleverly converted into six large baskets, filled to the brim with the precious herb, bat-

tened down, and left in the shallows of the lake.

Then came a festal spread, and, for the natives, a discreet allowance of the odious chacto. It was a stinging potion, but, coming as it did after such a strenuous day, its immediate effect was to produce slumber of the heaviest degree. Despite the pest of creeping things and of ravenous insects, they sprawled about the fire and became as logs.

When the scorching sun was again climbing, and the whites began to stir, they discovered with a shock that two more Indians had managed to vanish.

"It is the evil valley, Señor," said Matapo. "They have fled from that. Having had an actual taste of the place, they shun it more than ever, and they are affrighted at the fact of having to tread there again."

"Confound!" growled the Major. "I had already decided to make my return by way of the Rio Coati, and I was an idiot not to say so last night. It is too late to mend matters now, but we shall be dreadfully overloaded—unless we are lucky enough to hire more carriers as we go along."

Dick and Tim O'Flannel, while this was being said, had started with their rifles to stalk the shores of the lake. Water birds were

there in abundance—blue storks, heron, and some fine Muscovy duck. A bag was soon obtained and put to the pot at once. Breakfast was thus assured, and also sufficient for a full day's larder.

However, there was a new shock in store, for the morning's march had not long begun when a second company of travellers came into sight. These numbered perhaps fifteen in all, and were headed by several bronzed men in cotton suits and canvas gaiters. One of these wore a peaked blue cap, with a cord of fusty gold lace, and he it was who placed himself in Major Brand's path.

"A word with you, Señor," he demanded in firm yet silky accents. "I am from the Brazilian river gunboat, *Villa Bella*, and it is my duty to inquire as to your errand."

"Errand?" frowned Major Brand. "I really don't understand."

"Those baskets, Señor. They contain something you have plucked in the forest? Are they not loaded with valuable herb—yes?"

So direct a query took Major Brand by surprise; but he understood a moment later, for among the opposite group of Indians he perceived two of his own men—the couple who had deserted during the past night. Evidently their tongues had been wagging.

“ I will not deny,” growled the Major, “ that these hampers are full of a medicinal plant. But what of that ? ”

“ Nothing, Señor,” was the suave response, “ providing your papers are correct.”

“ Papers ? ”

“ Even so. A mandate from my Government, authorizing your quest.”

“ I have no such papers. But surely——”

The other smiled blandly, waving his hand. “ Pray understand,” purred he, “ that such warrants are merely a matter of form. Do not expect trouble. It is for me to present you to my superior officer, who is with power to put things right at once.”

“ Oh, very well,” was the gruff submission. “ I’ve no wish to avoid inspection.”

“ It is well, Señor. In a way you are fortunate, for my escort will help you over the worst part of your journey.”

The Major afterwards blamed himself bitterly, asserting again and again that he should have been more ready to suspect a trap. But the dapper little man in the peaked headgear was so very irreproachable, gently insisting that his own servants should bear the burden of the baskets ; and when darkness fell he entreated the adventurers to round off their exacting labours by taking a solid night’s rest.

To this they consented, Dick Brand alone being resolved "to snooze with one eye open." This, however, is no easy feat to achieve, and Dick's was an indifferent performance. In the chill of the dawn he opened both eyes very suddenly, craning out to take count of the camp. Try as he would, he could reckon up only seven, and then he perceived a patch of white that was pinned to the bole of a rubber tree at the foot of Major Brand's hammock. With a swift spring Dick got at this paper, tore it down, and held it to the dulling embers. The scribble upon it said :—

"MY DEAR BRAND,—It must have been my blue-peaked cap that so readily deceived you ! I, too, am in search of the golden ira, and now accept this happy opportunity of securing six basketfuls ! Yet do not despair, for Brazil is a vast country, and you may yet find plenty more. This should be a fine joke between us when next we meet.—Your fellow-adventurer,
"ADRIAN HEESH."

Judge the effect of that insolent missive on such a temperament as Major Brand's ! Directly he had absorbed the truth, he became like a living tornado. Heesh, after all, had misjudged his man. Having purloined the

Britishers' rifles, and strong in the knowledge of "two to one," he had decamped with a very light heart. Unarmed, argued he, his rival could do nothing in the shape of reprisals, and was presumably a person of sufficient sense not to attempt anything so absurd. But Heesh had bungled there.

"Matapo," bit out the Major, "I rely upon you to pick up the trail at once! We shall follow at double speed, overtake this wretched trickster, and, if needs be, fight him. Make this clear to the others, and tell them I demand their loyalty. They shall be well rewarded for what they do, but let no man think of backing out. Now—not a moment's delay!"

Such a spirit of boldness is catching, and the eyes of the natives gleamed in response. They went to the scent like a pack of hounds, and, once Matapo was satisfied of his spoor, the whole party slipped into single file and threaded rapidly in his wake down a sweet-smelling arbour, where butterflies darted and where crimson blossoms hung in luxuriant clusters.

At midday there was a deluge of rain, such as usually follows a fervid spell in that climate, but Major Brand did not allow this to delay him for more than ten minutes. While seizing brief shelter in a calabash grove, they ate what food was at hand, after which their forced march

was continued through the tail of the down-pour.

It was an amazing, a memorable output of energy, spurred on by a rare determination in the mind of every man. A couple of wild hogs at one time fled squealing before their quickened feet, and, later on, a herd of marsh deer. The latter made tempting marks, but this was no time for sport. Never before, maybe, had such tireless journeying been known in those matted labyrinths, and the price in sweat and scars and ripped attire was appalling to behold.

At length they emerged upon the banks of a turgid river. This, beyond doubt, was a higher reach of the Rio Coati, with a meagre path of lately trodden mud which held them to the water's course ; and by late evening—when the goat-sucker's plaintive cry betokened darkness—they came upon a bunch of ruined huts amid a shrub of cactus, suggesting the outskirts of a ruined village. There were other signs as well, and Matapo was elected to creep ahead and spy the land.

He was very soon back.

“They are here, Señor !” breathed he. “They are lodged on the slope but a few paces distant, in an old *casa de nação*. On this side of the casa is a sort of bamboo stockade,

and they are encamped within. Through the gateway I perceived a picket of rifles. If we could rush the entry and capture those——”

“We must try,” responded Major Brand. “Everything depends upon our taking them by surprise; but, in order to make sure of the weapons, we had better launch our assault while yet there is a little light. Is every one ready?”

There was a murmur of assent.

“Then come!”

Leaving the screen of cactus, they all stole on with thudding pulses to the foot of the slope. Above, though shrouded against a background of jungle, the bulk of a palm-thatched building was dimly to be seen. Voices could be heard, and there was a sparkle of fire between the bamboo palisading.

Matapo led upward, as soft in his going as a tiger-cat, but patches of loose quartz lay underfoot, so that others of the party were less noiseless in their action. The manœuvre was thereby wrecked, and a wild shout from the enclosure made the life leap in their veins.

“Charge!” roared Major Brand, and next instant he was dashing through the bamboo gap, with Dick and O’Flannel at his heels.

Something hard came at Dick to smite him down, so that he found himself grovelling amid those very fire-arms that Matapo had espied.

He seized at one, though half dazed, and was conscious of other hands that swooped near for a like purpose. The barrel he had clutched at was also gripped by some one else, and he tottered up to wrestle for its possession.

Meanwhile, Heesh himself, his face working with startled rage, had gone down to a clump from Major Brand's revolver; during which Tim O'Flannel—who had failed to snatch a rifle, and was pounding with his fists—had knocked a couple of the enemy Indians into their own fire, so that the poor wretches rent the night with their screeches. Upon this, others of the natives added their quota to the din, and above it all an unseen repeater began to spit from a fore-window of the casa.

These bullets, whistling over the main attack, effectively swept the gateway, grazing the throat of one and piercing another through the arm. O'Flannel, intent on coming to close quarters with the hidden gunman, plunged towards the casa, but was tripped over by a fallen foe, so that he went driving into the left side palisading with all his weight.

The bamboo-work, rickety before, collapsed beneath that shock like a toy structure, so that Tim subsided noisily into outer darkness amid a crackle of splinters.

The foray, in brief, had gone wrong, for

the Major's cohort, daring enough to a point, had been cowed by that hot rake of lead, and were now weakly hovering beyond the gateposts. Major Brand himself, wounded by a machete, was for the moment out of trim, and Dick, springing desperately to his side, saw a nasty prospect of the assault being divided.

Matapo saw that too, and shouted for a retreat, clubbing fiercely with the shot-gun he himself had commandeered, while Dick dragged his unwilling father to the exit. The immediate foreground of the casa being now too exposed for comfort, they bent leftward towards a palm-grove by the river. Here they collided with their own Indians, who were splashing in the shallows, making a frantic gabble over something they had found.

That something was a huge raft—a staunchly made structure of balsa-wood, buoyant as a cork and straining mightily upon the sogas that tethered it. The Indians, lured by this handy vehicle of escape, had been about to cut it free, but Major Brand came just in time to reassert his control.

“Hold, you scamps!” blazed he. “We have not finished yet—and when one goes, all go. Is every one here? I don’t see O’Flannel.”

“Shure, sor, then ye see him now,” came a voice from the rustling ground-growth. “An’

if you don't see him entoirely, ye can watch him spaking ! It's me that's bin havin' a roarin' fight on me own afther ye'd gone. I clouted one spalpeen——”

But Tim's glory-tales had to keep, for it was at that precise moment that Matapo made an astounding announcement. Dipping under the eaves of the bank to sever the forward mooring, he had grazed his hand upon a body of wicker. Swiftly he understood. Heesh, in order to keep the herb fresh, had immersed those stolen baskets in a shelf of the river, even as Major Brand had stowed them in the lake.

“ Señor ! Señor ! ” was the guide's excited whisper. “ The golden ira ! It is here ! It is all here ! ”

The minutes that next ensued were perhaps the most exciting that had befallen them yet. Heesh, up by the casa, was heard rallying his freebooters ; but they, thanks to O'Flannel's parting attentions, were by no means apt in complying.

Thus the baskets of ira, one after the other, were swung and piled on the raft, which was of ample size for men and cargo too. When all were embarked, Matapo's machete flicked through the hinder sogá. Away lurched the ponderous craft, rushing out to mid-flow, and simultaneously a pack of hazy figures came bounding to the reeds.

Threats, imprecations, and a salvo of vagrant shots—such was their royal send-off. The enemy had lost his spoil, and a very fit raft into the bargain. He found it, quite naturally, an occasion for soreness, and his sole consolation was that “those fool English” would probably wreck themselves on a palisada or over one of the many cataracts.

This prediction, to be frank, came close to being realized, and the hazards of our party on the Rio Coati might well comprise a narrative in itself. But two of the Major’s Indians, happily, were skilled bogadores—native paddlemen—and, thanks to their wary pilotage, the raft was guided to safety. Our adventurers a week later were back in Para, and ready for their homeward voyage.

They had triumphed mightily. The golden ira, wrested from its native soil in the secret heart of Brazil, consisted of some two thousand healthy plants, for its root, in most cases, had come out clean and intact.

Warm storage and careful watering kept the bulk of these plants alive, and they are now housed at a Middlesex nursery in glass sheds, which reproduce, so far as possible, their proper tropic conditions. Dr. Kennison assured our adventuring friends that they had wrought a splendid deed in the cause of medical science.

QUEST TWO

THE KEG OF PEARLS

IT was made clear to Major Brand, after his adventure in Brazil, that a great deal of work could be found for a man of his sound health and vigorous tastes. His announcements in the papers brought him constant inquiries and offers.

Dick Brand seemed equally well suited ; and his father decided, after due consideration, to let the boy continue as a partner in these affairs. Dick, after all, was full young ; he had acquitted himself well at school, so it would not seriously matter if the 'Varsity were postponed, even for a matter of years. As for Tim O'Flannel, he was a man born to action, and craved nothing better than to live by it.

The Major, as regards the answers to his advertisement, was obliged to pick and choose, for some of the proposals made were distinctly wild in character. These, unluckily, were often the most alluring, while one or two

commissions he took on nearer home—they could hardly be called Quests—though quite profitable, were without interest in the way of big excitement.

But better luck was in store, for one morning, when father and son were sitting in their rooms at Bayswater, a caller's name was announced: "Mr. Ted Serrell." The visitor, being shown in, proved to be a young man barely out of his teens. His face was lean and alert, his reefer clothes poor but tidily kept, while he brought with him the air of foreign lands and of foreign seas. Unmistakably he was a sailor.

"Well, Mr. Serrell, what's your mission?"

"I came because of this, which I tore from a newspaper," responded the young man, holding out the slip in a scarred thumb and finger. "It says, '*Any Quest or Enterprise, however—*'"

"Quite so. I'm the person you want to see—Major Brand—and this is my son. Sit down. No doubt you have a tale to tell."

"Yes, sir," answered Serrell, as he took the chair, "and a queerish tale, too, though true in every particular. More than two years since I was serving on the *Norma*, a tramp steamship of the older type, and we had tried conclusions with a typhoon when two days out from the Philippines. Crippled, the *Norma*

was carried far out of her course, and, when the storm had beaten past, there was further delay while the chief engineer shipped a new propeller. Things looked bad, with few of us fit to work."

"You mean there was illness on board?"

"Yes, sir; there had been a touch of fever before we ran into trouble, and this, of course, was aggravated by exposure and short rations. Our water supply stank, but a cry of 'Land!' raised new hope. It was an island.

"Well, the skipper ordered me to go ashore with the water breakers and six men. I was barely eighteen, and a fo'c'sle hand at that, yet I'd picked up so much navigation in my four years at sea that I was often singled out for jobs of this sort. Added to that, there were few fit men aboard, and even my chosen six men were very groggy. I soon found this to my cost, for just pulling the boat ashore put four of them out of count, and a fifth had to lie down just after we'd landed."

"Leaving you with one," said the Major.

"That's right, sir; he was a Kanaka, named Pelo. Well, we shouldered a couple of breakers each, and began to push through the tropic growth. Luckily we had thought to bring Pat, the ship's dog, a brisk little terrier, with a wonderful nose for water. I had Pat on a leash, and, when we'd struggled along for about

ten minutes, the dog put up his muzzle and strained to enter some dense scrub.

“I was obliged to give him his head, and he dragged me through bush and creeper till I stood waist-deep in a thick foliage of tapioca plant. Then I gasped, and so did the Kanaka, for there, at the foot of a huge tree-fern, Pat was whining before a grisly find.

“It was a human skeleton, sir, bleached clean by the long action of air. It was lying on its back, with its knees drawn up, and one hand clutched at a tin tobacco box. Stooping, I drew the box from those lifeless fingers. It was caked with rust, but when at length I had forced the lid I found within a roll of linen with close writing upon it. And here, sir, that linen is.”

Serrell drew from his pocket a well-worn wallet, producing from this a grimy piece of material. The message on this was sufficiently plain, and Major Brand read as follows :—

“I write this hoping that it may fall into British hands. I was marooned here on July 4, 1898, by Peter Noakes, a rascally Swede of the trading brig *Firefly*. He tried to feed us on poisonous junk, and this is what I got for advising my mates to be men, and fling both him and his unclean tack overboard.

“ I am a good bit of a diver, and in the lagoon I found such an oyster-bed that pearls got to be near as common as pebbles. That has been my work and amusement of late. The main path I cut up through the island finishes at a group of poon trees. In the midst of these is a stump of dye-wood, and ten paces to the north of it will be found a big slab of rock. Beneath that is a keg packed with my choicest pearls—about half of them being of the black variety.

“ This island is sometimes visited by head-hunting Dyaks. I have avoided them so far, and I pray that it may be so. I shall die by my own hand rather than fall into their clutches.

“ JOHN DEEN (Englishman).”

Thus abruptly the statement ended, and slowly Major Brand folded it up.

“ Poor John Deen ! ” murmured he.

“ Yes, sir,” nodded Serrell. “ I felt a bit choky about it myself, and I expended more strength than I should have in covering up his remains. I felt plumb exhausted, and Pelo seemed queer, too. We pushed on somehow, an’ found water, but it was a toss-up whether we’d have strength to reach back to the ship. Anyhow, a quest after them pearls was out of the question. We were weak, we’d no idea of

what obstacles lay beyond, an' there was our needy comrades to remember. So we set back, an' all somehow reached aboard the *Norma*.

"Well, sir," continued Serrell, "the condition of the crew was such that we got up steam and quitted without delay. I told the skipper about my discovery, but he would give no mind to the matter. As things panned out, he was quite right, for we only just scraped into port. Several, including Pelo, had died, and the rest were quarantined—the skipper and me being liberated first. It was Captain Burton's last voyage, and when the matter of these pearls cropped up again he told me to do as I pleased."

"He made no claim in the matter?"

"None, sir. He merely advised me to keep the thing up my sleeve. This I did, but I've had baddish luck, with never a chance of revisiting that island, though I still have its bearings all right. I could find a cheap ship and a cheap crew, if only I could meet a responsible gentleman to undertake this quest. When I saw your advertisement I hoped I might find you willing."

Major Brand smiled. "What you also need," observed he, "is some one to put down the money."

"That's true, sir, of course," murmured Serrell. "I was thinking it all over in the

train, and I'd give you a square deal. I've the offer of this ship dirt cheap ; the *Medusa* she's called, of Tilbury—no use for much else, but good for our purpose. I also met a man called Gorringe, who would run the engines. It wouldn't ruin you, sir, and I offer you a half share."

Major Brand pondered, pacing up and down, while Dick re-examined John Deen's tragic message. Father and son consulted together, after which the Major said,—

" Well, look here, how would this suit ?—a third share to me, another third for yourself, with the remaining third divided among the crew."

" Why, yes, sir," was the eager response. " I offered you better than that——"

" I know ; but I think this rag of cloth should lead to a genuine find. So I am ready on those terms to pay and play my part. You've lunched ? "

" No, sir——"

" We'll lunch together at once, and then make tracks for Tilbury Docks. Dick, will you kindly ring that bell ? "

Tim O'Flannel, standing in the stern of the *Medusa*, looked puzzled. He turned to the Major.

"Faith, sor," murmured he, "jest take these glasses an' have a quiz. Oi've just spotted that yacht again, and indade I'd swear she were the *Swift*. Don't you remember, sor? We met her owner, a Dr. Bright, when we stopped at Labuan. Shure, you'd almost think that yacht was trying to keep us in sight."

"Yes, she is."

"What!" Dick Brand, also present, started. "What do you mean?" added he.

"That yacht *is* the *Swift*, and she's trailing along in our wake. It's all pre-arranged."

Dick and O'Flannel gasped.

"Sor, this bates me," muttered Tim. "I don't——"

"Hush, man, not quite so loud," whispered his master. "The truth is that I have taken a precaution, for this voyage finds us in disreputable company. Ted Serrell's honest enough—I felt that from the first—but this 'cheap ship' of his is fit only for scrapping, and as for his 'cheap crew'—!" The speaker paused with a sniff of disgust. "Well," added he, "I never met such a motley mob in my life. They look like cut-throats to a man!"

"You're right," agreed Dick, "and they were certainly getting too rowdy until you took 'em in hand. Anyhow, there's been no

more gambling on deck since you went tooth and nail for them that day ; they go in bodily fear of you, even if they sometimes outwit Serrell. I'm afraid there's a lot of rum on board."

"There undoubtedly is, and I reckon that man Gorringe, who pretends to be so loyal, is often a leader in those drinking bouts forrard."

"Indade he is," nodded Tim. "Oi've caught him at it."

"Well, anyhow, I've tried to provide against possible disorder. When chatting with Dr. Bright at Labuan I learnt that he was about to cruise in the same waters as ourselves. So I put my cards on the table, told him all, and asked him to keep on our track. You will notice, however, that he now and again holds off, for we don't want to rouse undue suspicion. Our officers know, Mr. Higginson and Mr. Emery, both of whom we can trust. This sickness of Mr. Emery's, however, is most unfortunate ; he now lies in his bunk, and that's *one* good man——"

"Land on the port bow !"

The cry came from the look-out forrard. At once there was an eager bustle on the decks, and a crowding over to view the ship's destination.

Serrell spoke to the engine-room, and the *Medusa*, going about, put her nose towards that bank of deep blue which lurked in the distance. As the isle of pearls came into clearer view, showing a crown of green foliage and long rollers of milky foam, few aboard dreamed what adventure it held in store.

Major Brand, however, was cautious. "I'll go ashore as arranged, Serrell," said he, "taking with me Dick, Tim O'Flannel, and three others, all armed. I shall, as agreed, have a good look round, and signal to you should I note anything odd."

"Right you are, sir."

A boat was lowered, and the strand was duly reached. Landing was easy, for the coral did not, as in many cases, form a barrier reef. But it was enough to enclose a small lagoon, and a craggy islet of this screened something which our friends did not notice till the moment of springing out.

At the margin of the lagoon, drawn up to the sparkling sand, were seven native sampans! Major Brand knit his brows in a vexed frown; here was a contingency of the very sort he most feared. For reasons of policy he had planned to pursue his quest on the island with just a trustworthy few. This, however, rendered that plan too rash in another way.

There was no help for it. Climbing to a high point of coral, Major Brand signalled the ship, using his arms as a semaphore. The result was prompt ; another of the *Medusa's* boats came forging ashore, containing six more men under Ted Serrell, three being armed with Lee-Metford rifles. Serrell hurried with Major Brand to inspect the strange craft.

"I don't like the looks of it, sir," muttered Serrell.

"Nor I. It may mean that some of the wandering Dyaks who frequent these seas are in possession here, and if so we must look to our lives. We mustn't divide our strength. Better risk losing the boats than weaken our main force by leaving some in charge."

"True for ye, sor," ventured O'Flannel. "If aught did happen we could aisily signal the ship to fetch us off again."

"That's so," agreed Serrell. "We'd better keep in a body."

A start was made forthwith. Major Brand went first, with the brawny Tim O'Flannel, while Serrell and Dick brought up the rear.

Having crossed a first sparse stretch of vegetation, they plunged into quite a primeval forest, thick with dye-woods, palms, and tree-ferns. There was always a faintly defined track.

Serrell, at Dick Brand's suggestion, tore a thick sapling from a poon tree and shortened it to the length of a serviceable club, whittling it roughly with his strong jack-knife. The unarmed seamen who trudged in front followed this example, so that all were now provided with weapons of a kind.

After half an hour's hard walking the luxuriance lessened, and bigger trees stood up without such a press of shrub. Here, beyond doubt, was the grove of poons they sought, and, what was more to the purpose, the whole crowd of them were presently clustered round a big and blackened tree-stump.

Major Brand produced a tiny compass, rapidly paced out to the north, and so into the fringing scrub. Others joined him, and hearts beat high as willing hands cleared a grey slab of rock.

The huge mass came up at the first heave, and there was a gasping shout, for poor John Deen's statement was so far fully proved. A good-sized keg nestled in the pit beneath.

Tim O'Flannel, working in his fingers, brought off the jammed lid with a powerful jerk, and Major Brand felt sure they had made a princely find. The keg brimmed with pearls of the choicest kind, a percentage of these being dead black.

There was a general stir, all murmuring with excitement save Gorringer, the engineer. The latter, silent, flushed a little, and his small eyes gleamed greedily.

"Come, lads," spoke Major Brand. "There is need for both caution and haste. Don't let us forget we are not alone in the place. If those sampans——"

He stopped with a jerk, for Tim O'Flannel had gripped his arm, pointing into the deeps of tropic growth. Major Brand saw a yellow face dip from view, and he issued a shout of warning to his armed followers. At that same moment a crack rang out from a clump of bamboo, and a bullet sang past his shoulder.

Finely cool, the Major gave word to fire and then to retire. The Lee-Metfords rattled out on a blind aim ; but, before the retiring movement could be effected, the air was rent by an ear-splitting yell, and a horde of figures came leaping through upon them.

Dyaks they certainly were ; a few only armed with guns, the rest with parangs. They were all half-naked, and utterly savage in appearance.

"Hold together, lads !" cried Major Brand. "Fire to hit—and keep your ground."

From ambush, no doubt, the finding of the pearls had been observed, and this wild burst

from cover was intended to scare the whites into instant retreat. But, happily, they held their pitch in that first critical moment, facing those horrible, chopper-like parangs with clubbed rifles and poon-tree cudgels.

Firing was soon out of the question, but most of the riflemen were still staunch in the brunt of the attack. Some, as the Dyaks broke right and left, even pounced from behind and closed with their assailants, fighting grimly to deprive them of their arms.

Major Brand fell thus, at grips with a stalwart savage. One of the others—a chief, to judge from his clothing—swung his parang to drive at the Major's broad back.

But O'Flannel, dodging up from behind, struck at the yellow knuckles with his rifle-butt. The weapon was dropped with a howl, and Tim was alert to seize it.

At this point the natives started one by one to leap back into cover.

It was then that serious disorder began. The sailors, having successfully kept their ground, should now have held staunchly together; but instead, when the final four or five Dyaks went off in a body, as many hot-blooded Britishers leapt after them into the tangle.

Major Brand, dazed, pushed to his feet. "Follow up!" cried he, after one halting

moment. "We must still not risk being divided."

Tim, Dick, Serrell, and a couple of others obeyed their superior's order, and set at once after the crashing steps of their fellows in front.

It was a headlong plunge into jungle, but they dragged through at last to a little plateau overlooking the northernmost fringe of coral. Three Dyaks on the beach below were racing for an elbow of rock, and four *Medusa* rifles were levelled to fire. The bullets sped wide, and the enemy slipped from view.

"Let them go, lads," panted Major Brand. "No use following them farther."

"But they'll gain their sampans and get away, sir," ventured one of the men.

"No matter now. They're utterly scared and bent on flight, so I don't think they'll stay to tamper with our boats. Anyhow, there are those pearls to be thought of. Back to the poon grove at once."

The command met with smart response. The grove was regained, but was found to be quite deserted. As yet, however, Major Brand did not sense treachery in any of his own crew.

"How many of our party hung behind here?" he questioned.

"There must have been five, sir," answered Ted Serrell, after a quick calculation. "Gorringer and four others."

"Well, they're gone—and so are the keg of gems and some of the water-barrels. No doubt they decided to make for the boats at once, expecting us to meet there. It was risky, for they have only a couple of rifles. However, we must be quick to follow. Come, let us get to the shore sharp."

But when they emerged from the trees and could see the beach they received a terrible shock. The native sampans, with triangular sails set, were speeding away in the distance.

To these, however, little heed was paid. The amazing thing was that the *Medusa's* two boats had both been rowed away by Gorringer and the others, and were at this moment being drawn up to the *Medusa's* ladder!

Gorringer's companions, as he climbed to the *Medusa's* deck, were a Portuguese and a trio of half-breeds—for the ship's crew was composed of all nationalities. These were met by the first mate, Mr. Higginson, who had been left in charge, and that officer was promptly set upon and bound.

The other five hands remaining on the ship by this time had come running up, and Gor-

ringe addressed them hotly, explaining the find of pearls.

“It’s every man for himself where this is concerned,” cried he. “These gems divided among a score, with fatter shares for the leaders, don’t take our fancy. There ain’t a moment to lose. Who’s with us? We’re out to play a big game, and every man-jack of us will finish with bursting money-bags!”

A glimpse of the rich spoil induced three more to throw in their lot with the Gorringe rogues, while the other two were forced into the dinghy with Mr. Higginson directly the *Medusa’s* steam was up.

Gorringe had seized the pearls, and, as a means of getting away with them, he had also dared to seize the ship.

While those in the boat and those in the island were still staring blankly at the *Medusa’s* dwindling shape, a new cry was raised, and there was a pointing of fingers. A large, steam-driven pleasure yacht was bearing down fast from windward. The *Swift* was keeping her promise!

Instantly there was fresh bustle. Mr. Higginson, his hands being freed, directed the return of the two *Medusa’s* boats to the island, and those stranded on the beach there crowded into them. Thus, half an hour later, when the

hailed yacht hove-to well outside the reef, these two boats were smart to row up and speak her.

A few urgent words, and an accommodation ladder was promptly lowered.

Dr. Bright, the owner of the good yacht *Swift*, was a brisk, silver-bearded man of forty.

"The scoundrels!" voiced he, as he heard Major Brand's quick story. "So the fears you expressed to me at Labuan were well founded—and a good job, sir, you're a man of foresight! Wait!" He rushed to speak his engine-room. "The *Swift* is the very bird for this job," roared he, rubbing his hands. "We'll run your *Medusa* down in an hour, as sure as you hear me say it; and if she don't stop there's a little gun in our bows with which we can talk mighty big."

Then began the excitement of a chase which must be imagined rather than described. That the "tramp" could be no match for the shapely *Swift* was evident from the start; though by the steamship's belching funnel it was clear that Gorringe was crowding on all power.

However, the *Medusa* was overhauled length by length, till running figures could be seen on the bridge and upon the quarter-deck.

Gorringe showed no signs of slacking. A rascal always—he had fallen from much higher

appointments to his present position through dishonesty—he was now making the most desperate bid of his life. He knew fully the risk, and, knowing it, only one man in a hundred would have dared what he was doing.

The near neighbourhood of the little *Swift* as yet did not greatly alarm him, for he failed to see what harm it could do.

But the *Swift*, as the owner of her had said, carried a small brass cannon in her bows, and an officer at this moment was sighting it carefully.

There was a boom, a roll of smoke, and a shell tore over the roof of the *Medusa's* galley.

There was a howl of dismay from the deck of the bigger vessel, and Gorringe was heard bawling from the bridge.

Two rifles spoke presently from the poop, and so close were the two vessels that a bullet went clean through the door of the *Swift's* engine-room.

Then, with amazing suddenness, the *Medusa's* screw missed a turn, appeared to kick, and so stopped dead. She ran out her few lengths, and then held where she was—wallowing.

What had happened? No one knew then, but the truth was discovered later.

Mr. Emery, the sick officer, had lain unreckoned in his bunk. By degrees he had

learnt the state of affairs, and had watched the stern chase through a port. Now, crawling to the engine-room, and finding it for the moment deserted, he had put the running gear out of action.

Thus he did much towards giving back the ship, for men—a couple of boat-loads—were lowered from the yacht at once, and they pulled lustily across the water between the vessels.

Even then, had they set themselves doggedly about it, the handful of rascals on the *Medusa* could have done much to keep off boarders, for the advantage of position was all with them. But their mongrel blood had failed them, and all Gorringe's shouts and threats did not result in more than a half-hearted show of fight.

In their panic they seemed to forget to use their rifles. The first Britishers to climb the port rail came in for some nasty knocks; but when half a dozen had gained the deck it became an easier affair. Tim O'Flannel alone, charging along like a bull, carried nearly all before him, while Dick Brand, close behind, bore down the wavering one or two. Within half an hour the makers of trouble were all securely in irons.

Before Major Brand parted with his well-met friends of the *Swift* he called a meeting

of all loyal hands, and a new agreement was made as to the division of the spoil.

Gorringe and his dupes never got their due punishment, for they were taken into port and merely discharged. But they missed a share in one of the richest Quests our three friends ever undertook.

QUEST THREE

THE PRISONER OF KAAR ZHARTA

“TIM, where is your revolver?”

“Shure, sor, it’s in me pocket; though how O’im to get it through these infidel garments is a problem that bates me!”

“Better dig it out at once; you can carry it hidden beneath the folds of your haik. Besides, you’ll probably need it, for if the fact comes out that we are not Moors at all, but merely British in disguise, there is pretty sure to be a skirmish.”

“Whirroo!” muttered Tim, smacking his lips at the prospect.

“But we don’t want a fight, remember. When we reach the café, Dick and I will pass inside, while you will remain on guard. Speak to no one—just listen. That clear?”

“Faith, yes, sor. Just lave it to me.”

“Then right ahead!”

Tangier by night and Tangier by day are two very different resorts. When a noontide

sun bathes the white wonder of its houses, picks out its domes and minarets, or lights up the ramparts of its Kasbah—then indeed, against a setting of dazzling blue heaven, it well fulfils its title of a city “protected by the Lord.”

But this changes as the night comes down. When the eye no longer deceives one begins to realize that Tangier is only beautiful on the higher surface. Its streets are black, narrow, and utterly neglected; its pitted pavings are strewn with every filth imaginable; the meagre figures that flit by from the duars or mellahs carry dirt and disease. Tangier, in brief, is no desirable city to explore after dusk without a dragoman, and with only a glimmering lantern to help one on. What is more, our friends' mission had brought them to the most unsavoury quarter—a locality of crooked alleys, jutting walls, and puddles of slimy mess. But at length, groping beneath a low archway, they arrived at their goal—the hutch-like door of a small café.

“Now, Dick,” muttered the Major, “we take our fate in our hands!”

Saying which he opened the door and marched boldly in, followed by his stalwart son. The interior was faintly lit, but there was no uproarious song being howled to the

beat of tom-toms or the twang of a gimberry. This hovel had an air of sinister quietness—but it was not deserted.

Three figures sat at an inner table—three shaggy customers who wore the goats'-hair garb of mountain Berbers. Deep in some gruff discussion, they started at this unexpected entry, and quick hands darted to belts of raw-grained leather.

Major Brand, however, tanned and black-bearded beneath his turban, a very convincing Mussulman, took no perceptible notice. After the usual greeting in Arabic, "Peace be with you," he walked to another lounge. Dick sat beside him, while the keeper of the café, El Kadi—a tall, wiry ancient clad in grimy farajia—moved forward to salaam and inquire their needs.

"You come a long journey?" asked El Kadi, his tones soft, his beady eyes a-glitter with suspicion.

"It is as you say," answered the Major. "I am El Hadj Hassen el Baba, and this is my son Shem. Our camel train broke down. We are late and weary."

El Kadi's doubts were by no means laid to rest, but Major Brand was blandly unperturbed. At length both he and Dick were served with cups of highly sweetened tea, green and syrupy.

Meanwhile a couple of those scowling mountaineers at the distant table had lit up pipes of keef, better known as bhang, an obnoxious drug that has a very lulling effect on the senses. The fumes floated towards Dick, and he presently yawned. That gave Major Brand an idea.

"Don't sleep," muttered he beneath his breath, "but pretend to."

Dick took the hint, and after a few minutes had passed both father and son were apparently dozing. El Kadi rejoined his patrons at the other board, and an interrupted confab was resumed.

The talk was of money, and very soon the parties became heated. One of the Berbers took a pouch from his belt, counted out a certain number of coins, and pushed them towards his host. El Kadi spurned these; he began to show signs of passion.

"No, no!" hissed he, with growing frenzy. "Go back to your master and tell him that I will not be treated like a lackey who fawns at his bidding, and then——"

"Ssh! Be silent, or——"

"I will no longer be silent! Last time I was cheated of my dues, and also the time before. Have I not earned my full portion? Our Lord Mohammed—on whom be peace—

knows well that I have earned it. Give me all that you bring in that bag."

"The bag is now empty."

"Rogues that you are, I do not trust you ! Let me see !"

El Kadi made a snatch at the pouch, and all three of the others sprang up together. They pounced upon him, and the table went over with a crash, scattering the pile of coins, which jangled and rang in every direction.

Major Brand leapt to his feet, and so did Dick. That fracas on the floor, so sudden and precipitate, presented a tingling spectacle. The luckless El Kadi was squirming for his life, while the others strove to pin him by the gullet. Berber blood warms swiftly, and these men were as ugly as their looks. A dagger, indeed, was poised for the drive when Dick and his father sailed in.

Dick grabbed the striking arm with all his might, and was dragged bodily into the mêlée. The Major, in an ambitious attempt to grapple both the others, got knocked into a corner divan. El Kadi, staccato, was pouring forth threats and prayers, and the assault was just striving to its feet—when Tim O'Flannel bounced in.

Tim came like a tornado. He had the advantage, now that the fray was scattered, of

being able to pick his marks. He picked them. Those hillmen dreamed that the day of doom had burst on them unawares !

Thud, thud ! They were rattled like nine-pins, and by the time they had shambled up there were other fists besides Tim's to lay in a second dose.

The fist is an unique weapon. Its effect upon the unskilled is peculiarly demoralizing. Those ruffians had pistols in their belts, but they never thought of drawing them. Instead they turned tail, and picked up tracks for home. A brief panting, a patter-patter on the cobbles—and they were gone !

El Kadi, sinking upon the divan, moaned and rolled his eyes. "May the good Allah reward you," wailed he, "for you have saved the life of his servant. As for me, I am your slave. It is a vow. Speak, that I may obey !"

"Then listen. In the wilds of the Atlas, secure in his mountain fortress of Kaar Zharta, there lurks a bandit by the name of Abdullah el Harram. You have heard of him ?"

El Kadi's visage paled. "Yes, Excellency," he mumbled. "I have h-heard of him. There is a price on his head—but he will never be caught."

"Oh ! And why not ?"

"Because he is more cunning than a fox ;

yea, and twice as cruel ! Even the Sultan knows that. When Abdullah the Lawless seizes a man there is but one thing to be done—a ransom must be paid.”

“ As it happens, I don’t agree with you. Abdullah, as a matter of fact, has gone one step too far. A few months since he made capture of Sir Bennett Moore, the British geologist. Therein Abdullah was a fool.”

“ I—I do not understand, Excellency,” quavered El Kadi. “ This British traveller was in the wrong ; every one knows it. He was forbidden to visit the hills ; he was warned——”

“ Quite so—quite so. Yet Sir Bennett Moore’s liberty will never be bought—never. Not a duro will be paid.”

“ He will be left to die ? ”

“ No, he will be rescued. I intend to rescue him myself, and *you* are going to help.”

“ I ? ” El Kadi threw up his hands. “ You speak in mysteries. Why should you say this to me ? ”

“ Because you are one of Abdullah’s jackals. For the past two years you have been acting as his go-between. Oh, it’s no use for you to shuffle about like that ; I know what I am saying, and I’ve got you in a corner from which there is but one way of escape. Besides, you have no reason to protect Abdullah.

He has played you false times out of number. Those riff-raff of his but a few minutes since were plotting to cheat you again. You cannot deny it ! ”

“ No, no ! ” El Kadi, in a burst of passion, wrung his hands and beat the air. “ It is true ! ” cried he. “ Abdullah has treated me like a dog ! ”

“ Then the hour is ripe for you to follow a new master—and one who will repay you handsomely. I am told that the Shulluh villages are dangerous to those who cannot show the Sultan’s seal ; and I am also aware that you have great power with the hill tribes.”

“ It is true, Excellency,” was the proud rejoinder. “ Here I am as the dust of the plain, but there I am the voice of the Prophet.”

“ And you know the secret pass to Abdullah’s stronghold ? ”

“ I know it. Yet this is naught but madness ! Before you meddle with Abdullah the Lawless, I beg you to weigh the cost——”

“ Enough—I have spoken. Here, before you have earned them, I leave ten gold pieces. There will be many more to come. We shall be by the gate of the Kasbah at dawn, with mules and baggage. Be there to meet us. There will be sorrow in your household if you should fail.”

“Perils beset us, Excellency! Shall we pause until sundown?”

“No. Now that we have triumphed thus far, it would be fatal to linger. Push on.”

“Ya Allah!”

Besides El Kadi and the three Britishers there were four muleteers to the party—these latter consisting of negroes and a half-caste Jew. The only pony in the caravan was a mettlesome little barb that Major Brand, somewhat against advice, had chosen for his own use.

The stark, yellow plain of two days since had given place to rising ground, palmetto-clad, upon which the chief way-marks were whitewashed kudas—the tombs of long-dead saints.

Now this had wonderfully changed, for the heights had been reached. Behind was the last village, perched along an eyrie ridge, and half lost amid vernal olive groves.

To the west was a sloping valley, dotted with gum cistus and thyme. To the east, and stretching far ahead, were the mighty mountains, overwhelming in grandeur, and wreathed in their higher fissures with gleaming masses of snow.

“Sublime!” exclaimed Dick, aglow with healthy pleasure. “How grand this all seems after that barren, gritty desert.”

"True," agreed his father. "But don't let the beauty of the surroundings prevent you from keeping tirelessly alert. We are now in the hands of El Kadi, and he may be leading us straight into the jaws of—what?"

"Yes, it *is* pretty rotten to feel so helpless. I wish one could trust that sleek-tongued buffer; but, upon my word, one can't."

"No use talking like that—we've *got* to trust him."

"Well, he's a pretty dubious thread to hang upon. Ever since he knew us for what we are, a band of 'unbelievers,' I believe he has felt like jabbing us in the back. If looks could kill, we should all be awaiting burial!"

"So we should, but these Mohammedans are ever the same. That is why I picked out muleteers of a different caste. We can only hope that El Kadi's hate of Abdullah is stronger than his dislike for us. Ah, this is better."

They had emerged upon a grassy plateau, grown over with wild vines and bluish daisies. The head of a *zawia*, or saintly sanctuary, uprose on the peak beyond, and near by was a cairn of stones amassed by the faithful. With a muttered prayer, El Kadi flung another stone to the pile, and then suggested luncheon.

This consisted of barley bannocks and figs, obtained that morning from the village on the

crag. El Kadi's influence with the natives had never failed—every barrier had melted before the smooth magic of his speech.

“We now turn into these thickets,” said he, when the meal was done. “They are not impenetrable. I will even find a mule path ; but be careful to follow close. In a very little time we shall be—there.”

El Kadi said this in a tone of mystic meaning, like a conjurer who is about to complete the illusion. Our friends, as before, could only plod on blindly, and for a spell they brushed their way between plants of the cactoid species, prickly pear, and resin-scented scrub. Branches of stunted juniper, alive with Barbary monkeys, cloaked their view, but all of a sudden this ceased at the sheer face of the mountain.

El Kadi pointed, and the company broke forth with cries of amaze. For the towering rock, so formidable at first sight, was seen to be cleaved in twain. Before them was the narrowest and most elusive of gorges that the eye of man had ever rested on.

“This is the Tezah Zharta,” said El Kadi. “We are on the threshold of Abdullah's lair. The mules could not go much farther, so it is best to leave them here.”

Major Brand agreed to this, for he did not wish to drag either the muleteers or the pack-

animals into uncalled-for danger. Better they should quietly remain here and be immediately available in case of a forced retreat.

The Major, Dick, and O'Flannel, led by the sullen-faced Moor, crept onward, alone and on foot. This freak of a gorge, with layers of red shales, soon swallowed them, and it was a full half-hour before the shafting sunlight again forked to their faces.

"Holy sakes!" gasped Tim O'Flannel. "An' is it the end o' the world that we've come to?"

Tim really had cause to ask, for the moment was truly sensational. Our friends a second ago had been traversing a cramped-up chasm, the solid mass of which at either elbow had lifted to the skies.

Now, without warning, the right side wall had entirely ceased to exist, and the adventurers found themselves on a ten-inch ledge, with a precipice at their feet that dipped giddily down to a foaming torrent of water, some three hundred feet below.

"Be careful," was all that El Kadi said. "The footway grows narrower yet. But Allah is merciful."

It was the last word in dizziness. Gritting their teeth, they crept on by degrees, slithering horridly at some of the rougher stages, and

clinging like flies to every chance projection. At length—at long, long length—they turned the corner; the goat-track widened out, and so they were able to breathe with renewed thankfulness. Ahead was a plank bridge, and this gave access to a woody peak that was one mass of tree and fern from its bubbling base to its stately summit.

“We have reached our goal,” whispered El Kadi, his gaze shining with fear and disquiet. “That is the Zharta, and, except for this span of timber, it is entirely cut off from all things. Even the bridge, you notice, is made fast only by cords. The object is that it may be cut away at a moment’s notice and hurled into the Wad Jebel—that boil of water in the deep abyss. Abdullah, clearly, has had no warning of our approach, or the bridge would not have been here.”

“Good!” observed Major Brand. “But where is the Kaar Zharta? I see no sign of a castle.”

“It is concealed amid the cork and the carob trees. But come—we are too exposed here. Let us slip across and hide among the bushes. You will then be able to make your plans.”

They hurried across the rickety bridge, climbed a sharp steep, pushed through a stony

gap, and so slid down a glassy slope of rock that landed them plumply into a clump of almonds.

"Now, at least, are we screened from view," whispered El Kadi, a strange, strained tremor in his eyes. "I have promised to reveal to you the whereabouts of Abdullah's dungeons, and I will keep my word. But we are flirting with death! I must creep on first to make sure that the wood is clear."

"Very well. But you swear to return?"

"As Allah is witness!"

The speaker, unsheathing his curved dagger, glided in among the rustling bushes and was gone. Major Brand, his brows hard in a thoughtful frown, stole aside to view the immediate slope, sprinkled as it was with honeysuckle, dog-rose, and other queerly home-like flowers, mingled with aloes, almonds, and pomegranates.

"There is a sandstone rift away on the right," he reported. "Let's crawl into that. We shall then be occupying a sort of trench."

"You fear treachery?" breathed Dick.

"It is always well to be prepared."

Never had the Major spoken a truer word. El Kadi's furtive air, especially during these final stages, had not been reassuring. Major Brand knew that this Moor would sell them at

a moment's notice should his own skin be in jeopardy.

Even so, events came with dismaying swiftness, for the trio had scarce gained that sandstone hollow before there was a stealthy rush in the oak scrub just above. Then a face appeared, a swarthy face topped by a goat's-hair cowl. A score of other such bobbed up, and a crack of flintlocks rang to the gorge.

"Quick! Rifles ready! Fire!" roared Major Brand.

Our friends, tumbling into the gully, squirmed about and let blaze with terrific promptness. They fired to hit. One, two, three—the foremost of those hillmen came pitching into the declivity like shot rabbits.

The others, diving to cover, strove to return fire; but their primitive flintlocks, though so elegant to look upon, were playthings compared with the white men's Winchesters. However, those Berbers, savage to the core, lacked nothing in animal courage, and at a howled word they uprose with freshened zest and hurled themselves upon the blaring muzzles.

Springing back now, lodging themselves against the hinder sandstone, the cornered three clubbed their pieces and let drive. Heads cracked, and yelps of agony filled the air. Never did desperate Britons snared and trapped

give better account of themselves, and the hillmen's weapons, whirled in mad assault, were splintered from their grasp like matchwood toys.

"Out of this!" gulped Major Brand as the assail weakened. "Smash through, and bolt for the pass. Now!"

"Oi'm wid ye, sor!" boomed Tim O'Flannel. "Lead off! It's meself that'll hould the rear!"

A grin of pure joy illumined Tim's visage. Still hammering like a Vulcan, he barged out of the gully and put the fear of Allah into those now screaming Berbers. But a relay was streaming downhill, fresh to the fray. The hornet's nest of Kaar Zharta had been stirred to its inmost cells!

The Major and Dick, launching their dash for freedom, were comforted to note that Tim, leaping the bodies of his broken foes, followed hard behind. They gained the scrubby base, and now were they opposed by that glassy stone slide down which they had shot with ease, but up which——

Crack, crack!

Major Brand staggered, gripping at a forearm through which a Berber bullet had scorched its path. Reeling, he braced himself to recover, while a voice vaguely like Dick's bawled

courage in his ear. His vision cleared, and again doggedly he mounted. Alas! to no purpose—for the feet of a legion were pounding behind. They were crushed rather than seized—both father and son being borne to the sod by a whole cataract of humanity.

Abdullah el Harram, being a ruler unto himself, held court with some mock of state. The long, middle chamber of Kaar Zharta was regally adorned. There were arabesques in stucco, tile dadoes, and deep mouldings. There were domed ceilings richly painted in the style of the Orient, and the whole was lit by silver lamps that hung from silver chains.

Abdullah himself was enthroned on a purple mattress. Slaves were drenching him with rose-water, for he had just dined. This was a pity, for his form and disposition were slightly more offensive after a meal.

“ Well,” said he to his *feki*, “ what of it ? ”

“ My lord, these vile intruders have duly been captured. By the grace of Allah, they are delivered into your hands.”

“ How many ? ”

“ Two, my lord.”

“ El Kadi spoke of three ? ”

“ It is true. But one of them, a man of enormous limbs, broke into the woods, and

is yet being searched for. He cannot escape from Zharta ; the slope to the pass is being strongly watched."

" And the other two ? "

" Are standing on your threshold."

" Ah ! " Abdullah pondered, his smile growing yet more evil. " Well, I shall save them until morning," decided he. " Why amuse ourselves with these while another runs at large ? Let the hunt continue. Later I may join in it myself. Open the door that I may see."

This order in a trice was obeyed, so that the Major and Dick, manacled in the passage, found themselves being glared upon by the rebel chief of Kaar Zharta.

" Enough ! " croaked Abdullah. " Throw them into the cells ! "

The command was observed with literal promptness. The prisoners were hustled roughly through a carved archway into the open *patio*, with its marble fountain and cluster of unseen orange trees. Nothing stood to view save balcony pillars and whitewashed walls, for Kaar Zharta by now was wrapped in the azure cloak of night—a placid, wondrous night.

But what of to-morrow ? Major Brand, bundled past shadowy ramparts and through the

fragrant byways of a garden, mused on those stories that were told in Tangier. The eyes of Abdullah's victims were burnt out first, as a rule. Then there were other genial tortures. The father thought of his son—and shuddered. One glimmer of hope remained—Tim O'Flannel. If only Tim could elude these wretches, and slip clean away——

“ It's meself, sor ! Can ye hear me ? ”

The Major nearly jumped out of his boots. He had been thrust aside into a mass of vine while his dusky warders applied themselves to the unlocking of a low, studded door. And suddenly from the deeps of growth he had heard these words uttered in the voice of—Tim O'Flannel !

“ Can ye hear me, sor ? ”

“ Yes, yes ! ”

“ When they open that door to let ye in, make a bit of bobbery. Go for 'em hammer and tongs ! Beat out the lantern ! ”

“ But—but——”

There was no time for more. Dick and his gaolers were now alongside, and the ponderous door was creaking on its hinges. As Dick was first to hand, they seized him in violent clutches and hurled him in. The lantern-bearer was holding his light at arm's length—this was Major Brand's chance. For

the life of him he could not see the sense of it ; but he must trust to Tim. Flinging up his arms, he brought the iron shackles down with a terrific smash on the lantern.

In a trice all was confusion. As the lamp fell, guttering fitfully, the Major made good his job by jumping heavily upon it. The Berbers, in that succeeding darkness, came pouncing upon him with a united yell. Instinctively he strove to beat them back, and there was a roaring rough-and-tumble till the drastic butt of a pistol put him plumply out of count.

When he came to he found himself stretched on parched clay in a dark and pestilent hole. His aching head was propped on somebody's knee.

“ Shure, sor, an' is it better ye'll be feelin' ? ” whispered a contrite voice.

“ Tim ! How on earth did you get here ? Is—isn't this the cell ? ”

“ Faith it is, sor—and Oi nipped right in while you did your bit wi' them fetters. That was the bright idea, sor ! They niver got a wink o' me ; they niver drame Oi'm 'ere ! They'll be ferreting for me yet down in them cork woods.”

“ Where's Dick ? ”

“ Safe with us, sor. 'E's bin tappin' at that

inner wall, an' there's bin some knockin' back. Like enough it's the man we come to save—Sir Bennett Moore; though by the pigs it'll be lucky if we can only save ourselves!”

“But, Tim, man, why in the name of reason did you choose to join us here? It was the act of a lunatic! While you were still outside there was always some prospect——”

“Whist, sor, an' are ye forgetting? Don't ye remimber that we brought a packet o' files an' some cordite cartridges in case of a bit o' gaol-breaking being called for?”

“Yes, but——”

“Well, sor, an' Oi 'ave 'em all in me pocket, the whole bag o' tricks, together wi' your spare revolver!”

“My word!” Major Brand sat up with real energy. “Tim, I beg your pardon—there, I ought to have known, from old experience, that your head's screwed right side round! Well, and what's the plan?”

“To get out o' this right sharp, sor—or, at least, to make a good try. There's nothing to gain by waiting—and very like all to lose.”

“Can it be done by filing?”

“Not in a month of Sundays, sor. The fetters were aisy enough; Oi bent them off wi' me finger an' thumb—faith, Oi did. But yon door's another story. A cartridge in the

keyhole will be needed there ; indade, Oi've already got one fixed. Say the word, sor, and Oi'll touch her off."

" I'm sure it would be best, Dad," said the eager voice of Dick.

" Right away, then. Tim—do it ! "

There was the splutter of a match, the sizz of a fuse—then, well within the minute, a tearing explosion. They rushed from their corners, swung back the splintered barrier, and plunged through a choke of smoke into fresh, clove-scented air. A young African moon now rode above the boscage.

" Follow me ! " hissed Tim. " A bridle-path curls down the western spur. I guess I can locate it. Double ! "

They skirted the lowest ramparts and dived into a bed of calitris. Not a whit too soon, either, for a numerous body of Berbers, back from the hunt, with Abdullah in their midst, had just issued from the break of the bridle-path. Seeking cause of that explosion, they went clattering towards the dungeon hollow—a noisy, excited stampede.

But one, a mounted figure, remained—the figure of Abdullah el Harram. There against the sky he sat, a hunched and spectral shape upon a spectral pony.

Dick seized O'Flannel in a great and sudden

grip, whispering in his ear. The daring of impulse, to those who live by daring, is the richest gift of all. Here there was not the smallest pause, for Tim rose nimbly to the bait. He it was who whipped up behind Abdullah, meshed him about the mouth with a bandanna, and jerked him to the earth.

"What's this?" snapped out Major Brand. "Is that pony really of use to us——"

"We take *both*!" breathed back Dick. "A hostage, Dad—a hostage! My word, this is life!"

The rest was headlong. They bound Abdullah the Lawless in the flowing folds of his own haik, and also with a scarlet cord from his tunic beneath. Handled by Tim O'Flannel, he was as helpless as a kitten, though fierce and spiteful withal. When they had flung him across the saddle they took him downhill at a racketing gallop, followed always by shouts.

Fate brought them to the bottom unchallenged, and to that stony, slippery uptake leading to the gap. Here three hillmen were posted, guarding the pass. Tim shot a couple out of hand, and the odd rogue flew for cover. His yell for assistance woke the glades.

"Tight work!" voiced Major Brand, as they pulled Abdullah from the pony. "But

quick—I have a plan ! If we get him to the gap we are saved ! ”

Too grimly in earnest to slither, they hauled their man, now the merest bundle of clothes, up the glassy escarpment, propping him on his knees in the narrow mouth of the pass. The moonlight bathed them in a soft sheen of silver, making their features plain to those scores of braves who soon came tumbling into the dip below. Assembled in force, they levelled their pieces, yet dared not fire, for the bandage was now torn from Abdullah's face, and they recognized the anger-livid features of their own lord and master. Major Brand was holding a repeater at Abdullah's temple.

“ Back ! ” he roared in warning. “ If one soul of you attempts to mount that ridge, I will surely put a bullet through this creature's brain. Do not stir a foot, I say ! ”

They did not stir. As one man they hung there in pallid dismay. The person of Abdullah the Lawless was all-sacred to his followers.

“ Listen to me, Abdullah,” proceeded Major Brand, in that voice of latent thunder he could attune so well. “ I and my friends hold our lives at a pin's fee—and we rate yours at even less. Once having rid the world of you, we shall

ourselves perish happily. But we offer you one chance. Tell those hirelings of yours to bring Sir Bennett Moore and deliver him into our hands. If that is done, we will render you to them at once. Now—choose ! ”

Abdullah, finding his tongue at last, broke into a string of frenzied maledictions. But Major Brand shook him by the scruff of his neck till his teeth chattered, pressing the chill muzzle to his brow.

“ I give you three seconds to choose,” blazed he, “ and at the count of three I fire. Now, *one—two——*”

“ Stop ! *Wakke !* It shall be done ! ”

Abdullah, though still half-choked with fury, stooped over and spat forth his commands. His minions, crying their obedience, turned round and scurried to the coverts. Their zealous feet could be heard on the bridle-path as they clambered for the castle, and the ten waiting minutes that followed were ten of the most tense minutes of Major Brand’s life. Then he heard those servants scouring back, and anon they brushed through the almonds, pushing before them a tall, spare figure.

“ Is that Sir Bennett Moore ? ”

“ Yes,” came the answer, spoken in the stolid voice of one who has ceased to marvel at the sheer unexpectedness of life.

"Then creep up the slope and slip behind me. There is freedom at the rear. Be quick! Do not hesitate!"

The manœuvre was promptly carried out, while the Berbers hung passively back, for they seemed to have learned their rôle.

"Dick," shouted Major Brand, "have you got everything ready?"

"Yes," came the lusty answer, "Tim's at the bridge. Come as soon as you like!"

"Right!"

At that sonorous word the Major gave Abdullah a push that sent him spinning down that quartzite drop into the midst of his vociferous slaves. Four or five bounds took Major Brand to the bridge behind. The others were already over, and Tim O'Flannel was crouching, jack-knife in hand.

"Aisy does it, sor!" cried he. "There's but a single bind left, so trate her gently. That's it, whirroo! An' now to make it complete!"

Tim slicked through the sole remaining cord, bodily lifted the structure with one heave of his gigantic shoulders, and drove it heavily askew. The far-side lashings ripped to the dislodged weight, and next instant that lengthy span of timber, accompanied by a shower of dirt and boulders, went shattering

down, down into the depths of the Wad Jebel.

The bandits, in that same nick of time, came pouring and raging through the gap. Their crazy impetus very nearly carried them into the yawning gorge, but they clung about its brink and howled upon their fellows to press back. Two shots were fired, but that was all. Tim O'Flannel heard these spit up the cliff as he nipped round a precipitous bend in the wake of his fleeing party.

The muleteers turned out faithful—a happy circumstance to which this hazardous adventure owed all its final success.

Somehow our friends escaped from the hills—no small achievement in itself, seeing that El Kadi was no longer by their side. Yet they triumphed; and so, for the first time, we recount the true facts of Sir Bennett Moore's deliverance from the hands of Abdullah the Lawless.

QUEST FOUR

KWALI'S TREASURE

THE good ship *Prudence* lay on smiling waters in Princess Marianne Straits, with the vernal shores of New Guinea but a cable's length abeam. Upon her deck, lounging easily, were Major Brand and Dick. The Major, after eighteen strenuous months, had elected to take a holiday—a pleasure cruise—having fallen in at Brisbane with the master of this craft, Captain Begg.

It had been a lazy, delightful voyage, of great benefit to all three ; yet, had they spoken the truth, the old desire for action was stirring again in their veins. Indeed, Tim O'Flannel, irked by idleness, had turned in that morning to assist the crew. The Major and Dick were half inclined to follow suit, when Captain Begg, puffing at a pipe of dried coltsfoot, emerged from the cuddy. The captain smiled broadly. In his hand he carried a fat notebook in which he had been totting matters up.

"Well, skipper," was Major Brand's greeting, "has the trip turned out well?"

"Handsomely, sir!" was the brisk answer. "You see, I'd counted on at least three journeys ashore, with weary tramps inland, before having bartered off my goods in exchange for trepang, mother-o'-pearl, copal, and such-like. In one brief jaunt, however, I've collected as much as I can carry, and a quantity of ballast is now going by the board. That creakin' derrick's like music to me!"

The skipper chuckled again, deeply, and was plugging his bowl afresh when Ben Inch, bos'n's-mate, hove upon the scene.

"Hullo, Ben!" ramming down the weed. "How goes it? Nearly done?"

"Aye, sir; all but."

"Bully, then."

Ben lingered and coughed. "Little matter to report, sir. Jest found 'im in the forepeak. A stowaway."

"A stow—" Captain Begg's jaw dropped. "Did you say a stowaway?" demanded he.

"That's so, sir. Lad o' fourteen—fifteen, maybe. Bit queer an' dazed when we routed 'im out. Still, a hearty snack o' biscuit an' a tot o' weak rum soon put 'im to rights."

"But what in thunder's name is he doing on the *Prudence*?"

"That, sir, ain't made clear as yet. 'E wants some words with you."

"Pipe him along then—now . . . Oh, here, I suppose, the young villain is, along with Tim O'Flannel!"

For Tim, a broad grin on his face, was seen approaching up the deck, towing along a stocky, dogged-looking youth who seemed in need of a wash. The boy's tousled locks suggested recent sleep, but his face was alert.

"Well," barked the skipper, having blown his nose soundly by way of preface, "what are you doing on *my* ship? Where did you creep aboard?"

"At Brisbane."

"What! You've come all the way with us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what's your game? No fibs, now. What 're you after?"

"Treasure, sir."

"Treas—" Captain Begg stared the boy up and down. "Don't trifle with me," he said testily.

"No, sir, I'm not trifling. Of course, you don't believe, and I didn't expect you to. That's been my difficulty; every owner I spoke to called it 'bilge,' or 'clap-trap,' or something like that. They wouldn't spare me a passage.

So when I heard you were bound for the Arafura I didn't ask your leave—I took it. I just nipped aboard, you see.”

“Brazen young imp!” Captain Begg blew his nose again. “What's your name?” glared he.

“Lad Murray.”

“Lad? Queer, that.”

“Yes; I suppose I was christened so. I'm not sure. I've always lived with my Uncle Abraham, who followed the sea for many years. I think he traded for sandal-wood. During his lifetime he never mentioned the word 'treasure' to me, but he often threw out broad hints; and he told some terrible stories about the New Guinea savages, into whose hands he had fallen more than once. He was a keen old man, properly shrewd, and that's what makes me so sure that this chart of his really means something.”

“Chart?”

“Yes. My Uncle Abe left nothing behind him but a few old books. Among these was a clasp-Bible, which he always kept locked away. It was in this that I found a stiff bit of canvas-paper, part of a bigger map, on the blank side of which the sketch and writing appeared. I have it here. You shall see.”

Lad thereupon produced the object he spoke

of, and Captain Begg, leaning over, beheld the fairly neat plan here displayed.

Having carefully studied it, Captain Begg passed the plan to Major Brand, and the latter was at once conscious of an odd glow. Against his wiser nature, perhaps, this frayed and faded fragment began to weave a spell.

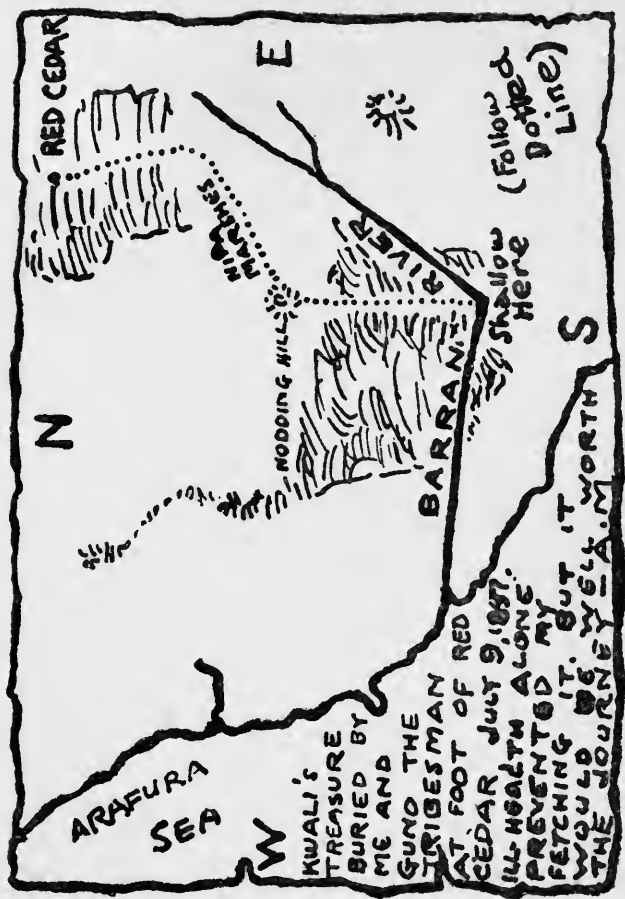
Not so with Ben Inch, however, who, respectfully enough, had also been taking a cursory view over the skipper's shoulder. Ben it was, indeed, who broke the silence—with a dry cackle.

"Purty good ole trade," declared the bos'n, using the Devonshire idiom. "I don't call that no map at all. Who's to find 'Noddin' 'Ill,' I'd like to know; an' as for nipa marshes—why, they'm all over the country, an' sago marshes, too! Not one o' them places writ down there'd ever be sighted on a proper chart."

"Oh yes, they would!" struck in young Murray. "If you look closer, you'll find several coastal points written faintly in pencil."

"That's so," agreed Major Brand, who now had the sketch tight up to his eyes. "Well, this is interesting, anyhow. But"—the speaker shook his head—"I never heard of the Barran River."

"No, nor I," chuckled the sceptic Ben.



“Shure, an’ why not ask Tambo!” suggested Tim O’Flannel. “He’s the very chap. Just see what he thinks.”

“So we will,” nodded the skipper. “Call him in.”

Ben went out on deck. “Tambo, boy!” shouted he, and a minute or so later reappeared with a squat, dark personage, whose only clothing was a pair of blue calico knickerbockers. Tambo—full name Tambano—was a typical black “boy,” whose knowledge of Dutch Guinea and Papua was second to none. The only difficulty with Tambo was his extraordinary lingo.

“Tell me, Tambo,” said the skipper, “have you ever heard of a river just hereabouts called the Barran?”

“Barran, boss?” Tambo pondered, then nodded with vigour. “Him li’l fellow river, a-like-a that.”

Tambo made a gesture of throwing a boomerang, whereupon Major Brand exclaimed loudly, for he remembered that “barran” was one of the bush names for that weapon; and the river, as shown on Murray’s map, was distinctly of boomerang shape.

“Could you guide us there, Tambo?” he asked.

A nod.

“ Will you—to-day ? ”

The black was dubious now. “ More better you been stay 'ere, boss. Him Tugeri country. Tugeri plenty bad fellow him. Tugeri catch him you, boss, chop head off big slice. Me been seen chopped heads hanging on Tugeri post, boss, plenty fine bunch—drip, drip ! ”

Tambo's rather lurid picture made Major Brand smile, though he soon fell serious again, for he knew there could be no exaggeration where these notorious head-hunters were concerned. However, he spoke robustly. “ Come, Tambo,” he said, “ I guess we know a bit about woodcraft, you and me—aye, and O'Flannel here as well. We've been pretty near the Tugeri haunts in times past, without falling into their clutches ; so I don't see that we need anticipate trouble. You aren't afraid ? ”

Tambo's only reply was to stiffen himself and grin, displaying blackened teeth and red-dyed lips, the result of betel-chewing.

“ We're after 'treasure,' Tambo,” added Major Brand, “ and, if that means anything in New Guinea, I suppose it means gold. If anything comes of this, I guess we shan't try to cut down your full and liberal share. How long would it take us to make the river mouth ? ”

“ We been get there hour'n half, boss, p'r'aps less.”

“Capital! Now, skipper, I suppose you’re agreeable to this?”

“I dunno, sir,” growled Captain Begg. “I scarce know what to say. This treasure stuff is mostly all moonshine—I’d never touch it to please myself. Still, as I understand the matter, you make this sort o’ quest your hobby——”

“Quests,” corrected Major Brand with a smile, “are really our profession. Indeed, as a rule, we take on Quests as a paid commission; but in this case, to oblige our young friend here, I am ready to act without any fees. Come, skipper, I’m sure you’d enjoy the adventure!”

“Ay, an’ so I might,” relented the captain, “if it weren’t for the fear of loss, owing to delay in——”

“Now, listen,” rejoined the Major. “As already admitted, you’ve gained time on this trip, and if any trading loss *should* occur, I’ll make it up to you—every cent.”

“Is that a fact, sir? You’re promising that?”

“Certainly.”

“Very well,” was the prompt response. “In that case I’m quite willing—quite!”

“Good! Then let us make ready the whale-boat at once!”

“ So this is the Barran River, is it ? Well, no wonder I’ve never heard of it before ; and even now I doubt if we shall be able to scrape through. Why, it seems completely choked ! ”

Thus spoke Major Brand, and certainly the aspect of things bore out his words. Figs, oaks, and acacia, looped with lianas, either sprawled across the sluggish stream or, actually growing in it, threatened to block all passage.

They nosed hither and thither, trying to squeeze an inlet ; but finally they were compelled to disembark, standing as best they could amid the slushed branches, and so dragging their whale-boat over.

Tambo was the agile, leading spirit, though all seven of them toiled with a will, to be finally rewarded by issuing forth into a fair-way. Then they settled to row, while the country unfolded on either hand.

For about a mile there was nothing in view save soggy mudbanks, topped by high reeds and patches of sago marsh. Except for a flight of bluish-grey heron, and the occasional half-hidden retreat of an indolent crocodile, there was little evidence of life, but this altered as they began to penetrate.

Thick brushwood now, and hale, overhanging trees came to the water’s edge, gay with blooms that were partly masked by the welter

of foliage. Butterflies of astounding size floated in the air like fairy petals. Black and white cockatoos cheeped their dislike for intruders, while radiant fruit-pigeons flashed to escape.

They had been rowing for nearly an hour when the whale-boat's keel suddenly grated, slithered, and then drove to a full stop.

"I believe we've reached the bend!" exclaimed Captain Begg, who had been studying the little chart.

They craned round, peering ahead, to behold only a wall of verdure where before there had been a lengthy vista. With some difficulty they clambered out, making fast their painter to a tangle of clean-washed root. Then they forced a way through the rank vegetation till Tambo hit upon what he described as a "path."

This, in the normal sense, was no path at all; but the "boy" knew his craft, and they told him to forge ahead. His only weapon was a pioneer's axe, but the others carried loaded rifles, while Lad Murray brought up the rear with a stumpy shovel.

The forest here was primeval, and soon all seven were drenched with sweat. Creepers and orchids laced above, while epiphytic ferns clad almost every trunk. Deviations were often called for, but Tambo's infallible

instinct brought him always back to the course due north.

At length they emerged upon a great wide clearing, exhibiting traces of fire, over which spread a prairie of coarse, rustling grass. To the right uprose a hill ringed about with pine and croton shrubs. Its bare summit was of knob-like form, bent downwards.

"Nodding Hill!" broke forth Dick Brand.
"We've surely struck it!"

"We have!" was the Major's pat response. He himself was frankly excited, and still more so when a nipa marsh was sighted, tracking nor'-east from the lowest spur.

They barged along the soppy outskirts in single file, harassed by mosquitoes, and overmastering a sea of troubles, till once again they were enabled to bear leftward, plunging into an arborage so completely overarched that not a ray of sunlight pierced it. The airless gloom of this place was nothing short of uncanny; but, as one welcome result, they had no scrub to battle with. Underfoot was just a matting of rotted wood, soft and slimy, where only ferns and lycopods had any chance to thrive.

Pressing forward at tingling pace, they came through to a dell-like, circular glade, exactly in the middle of which was a towering cedrilla.

"The red cedar!" voiced Captain Begg,

though, indeed, their impulsive notes all mingled together. That faded bit of chart so far had justified itself beyond all expectation, and there was every excuse for hopes to beat high.

Not a moment was squandered. Tim O'Flannel's jacket was already cast aside, and his shirt-sleeves rolled to the shoulder. Snatching the shovel without more ado, he drove it into the light and loamy soil.

A great pit grew as by magic, deeper and deeper. When this yielded no result Tim trenched a little aside, meaning to encompass the tree. He was scarce half round, however, before a sharp word escaped his lips.

"Shure, I'm on it—I'm on it!" panted he. "Whirroo!"

There was a thrill in the group then, and soon all arms were groping. Yes, a box was there—a carved, rectangular box. This was reality! Ben, the erstwhile scoffer, prised and clawed and hauled.

Up the thing came at last, and a few scrapes removed the clinging sods, to reveal a dead-black surface relieved by such cunning designs as only the artistry of a New Guinea savage can conceive. The flat lid of the receptacle was clamped down by two thick bands of bast. These, perished with age, gave in unison to

Tim O'Flannel's lusty pull. A dull snap, and the lid jerked up. Then——

Tambo, as he gazed within, fell back on his haunches with a hollow sort of groan. The others made no sound ; they were too stricken. For that ebony box contained nothing but—a pile of bones !

Bones, nothing more—and they were bleached as white as ivory, for the damp-proof box had kept them well preserved. They were the relics, seemingly, of some small animal, probably a dog.

The old bos'n straightened himself by degrees, wheeling upon Lad Murray.

"Humph !" growled he ; "so this 'ere uncle o' yours was a practical joker, was 'e—one o' that darned sort ? Well, I only wish you'd given us a 'int, that's all."

Poor Lad was dumb ; he just knelt there and stared into the pit of his vanished dreams. Major Brand laughed briefly, to conceal his pique. He administered a lusty kick, so that the box rattled back into its cavity, and he flung the cover on top. Then he picked up his rifle and started down the grove, the others following. They had almost reached the nipa marsh when some whirling object suddenly crossed their line of vision, and fell amid the fern.

The Major picked this up a little gingerly, for it was dyed crimson in part, as if with blood. It was a half-section of bamboo, carved into a haft, and thinned to the keenness of a razor. At the tip of it there were several odd little notches.

“ Arragh, then ! ” muttered Tim O’Flannel.
“ D’you see what that is ? ”

“ The knife of a Tugeri head-hunter,” answered back the Major, his lips compressed.

Their searching glances travelled out and back, but not a hint of life was visible. Everything was peaceful. Lad Murray, however, happened to glance aloft—and his cry echoed to the hills.

Hideous faces, besmeared with carmine and a-grin with malign joy, were thrust betwixt the tropic leafage. Lad’s shrilling outburst acted like the touch of some hidden spring. Every branch and bough within thirty yards dipped and shook, dropping its human burden as a tree may cast off its fruit. The whole surrounding scene, placid a moment since, became alive with screaming savages.

The latter did not make an immediate swoop ; instead they skipped and darted out till they had sown themselves about in a wide and scattered ring. Then, deftly stringing their bows, and with further horrid yelpings,

they commenced to pour in arrows as fast as they could aim them.

"Cover ! Into cover !" voiced Major Brand.

No thought of parley when caught in so tight a trap as this ; the most our little band could do was to plunge for a near clump of crotons, to seize what cover was seizable, and to answer the aborigines' call by opening a galling fire.

This they did, with such sweeping effect that the foe—ever to be cowed by a skilful use of fire-arms—fled howling from sight, leaving some twenty of their number writhing in the middle ground.

But this success was only momentary, for even five repeaters were all too few to guard so wide a territory. Thus, while the bulk of the assail was completely frightened off on the one flank, a second batch had been creeping nearer and nearer at the back. The air simply sang with shafts—poisonous ones, no doubt—but these, owing to the bowmen's horror of lead, were being sped at hasty venture, and were glancing quite high.

Soon, however, spears were added to the quota, and a couple of these did damage, first by ploughing Lad Murray's cheek, and next by impaling Tambo's shoulder.

The Tugeri, plucking up new courage, surged

in, being reinforced by another numerous party armed with stone-headed clubs. There was no scaring them back now ; no time to reload. With axe, shovel, and guns to smite with, the intrepid seven formed a back-to-back square, and literally fought for their lives.

Down went Major Brand to a half-dodged blow on the neck, and down went Tambo, who was weak from his wound. With fine grit, both Tim O'Flannel and Dick charged to clear that point of assail, while Lad and Ben tried to shield their fallen friends ; but the Tugeri were now simply on top, and the whole combat collapsed in a squirming heap of humanity.

Tim and Dick were dragged apart, and their wrists pinioned with cords of rattan. Then the others were held or forced to their feet, treated in like manner, and goaded to march.

Away they went, the injured barely conscious, trudging through tortuous forests till the open space of a village was reached.

It was a big village, having in the middle of it a darimu, or native long-house, to the posts of which hung suspended what had once been human heads, but which were now blackened and dried by long exposure. Near by were clustered other household dwellings, draped round with matting, while away against a banana grove were a number of huts built on

stilts, twenty or thirty feet up, and sometimes called mareas.

It was towards one of the latter that the poor prisoners were led, surrounded now by crowds of women and children, who had come flocking from their abodes to inspect the captives. Pigs grunted and curs yapped. The women wore short skirts of coco-nut fibre, and had tortoiseshell in their ears.

Up a ladder leading to the nearest marea our seven unfortunates were hustled, being flung in over the platform with scant ceremony. Here they were visited by a gaunt, elderly savage, whose scraggy limbs were netted about with strings and strings of teeth, most of which were clearly of human origin. This ancient's name was Jele, and he was retained as the tribal sorcerer. It appeared that the chief of the village, Itoma, was absent on a visit, and that the seven would be kept alive until his return.

With such comforting knowledge to subsist on, they spent a full week in that marea, the horror of which it is beyond any power to describe. Their scanty diet consisted of occasional fruit, cane-grubs, and sago-worms. Of these, the whites could bring themselves to tackle only the first, and as a result they went half-famished.

Mosquitoes, ticks, and other such pestered them all day long and all night long, till their persons became a mass of stings and bites. Tim O'Flannel declares that he has some of the marks yet—amid many other memorial scars! Two essays at escape were promptly scotched, and when—at about noon on the eighth day—a great hullabaloo proclaimed some high event, they had scarce enough spirit left to arise and peer forth.

This they did, however, to behold a stalwart savage advancing into the village attended by a sort of retinue. He wore a bird-of-paradise head-dress, and a heavy necklet of shells, teeth, huge glass beads, and other gewgaws. Through his nose was stuck a whittled skewer of tri-dacna shell—and his regal bearing proclaimed him to be no other than Itoma, returned from his wanderings.

The poor prisoners were very soon bundled down the ladder and thrust before this chief, who viewed them with cloudy mien. He nodded his head to Jele's scowling proposals, and this set on the mob, with a brandishing of head-knives, to chant their delight.

Things looked pretty grim, and Major Brand whispered in Tambo's ear. "Explain," urged he, "that our presence in the forests did not concern the Tugeri at all. Say that we came

to dig up a long-buried 'treasure,' which turned out to be no more than a box of bones."

Tambo complied, and as he spoke there flashed over Itoma's visage a miraculous change. Claspings Tambo's arm, he gabbled a score of questions, and the black's assent to these created an amazing stir.

"What is it, Tambo?" demanded Major Brand. "What's all the bobbery about?"

"Him say bone-box plenty precious thing," was the black's eager answer. "Tugeri love bone-box more better than life. Me been show him where bone-box lies. Him say we then go free."

All this seemed too good to be true, and was certainly inexplicable; but presently it came out that Kwali—one of the names mentioned on that chart of Lad Murray's—a great patron chief of the tribe, had possessed a pet dog which had long survived its master, and when this animal also succumbed to age its bones had been carefully preserved. The superstition was that, as long as these bones remained in Tugeri possession, so long would the soul and strength of Kwali the warrior remain also!

A certain Guno, however, an outcast of the clan, had stolen the ebony box to satisfy his grudge, conspiring with a white captive—Lad Murray's uncle, beyond all doubt—to assist

him in getting it away. The white man had probably concurred in the plan in order to gain his own liberty, though the crafty Guno, more than likely, had represented the chest to contain something far more valuable than canonized bones !

At all events the pair, being hotly pursued, hid their spoil so successfully that it had remained hidden ever since. Guno was slain, but the other made good his escape.

So ran the story, giving rise to this present turn of events. A chattering party set out forthwith, Tambo acting as guide, and in the course of an hour they were riotously back, bearing among them that ebony case which had caused our seven adventurers such perfect disgust.

The whole settlement, nearly crazed with joy, prepared at once for festal rites. Mighty fires were kindled as the darkness fell, drums and dancing-shields were fetched, and ceremonial waxed ever more ecstatic. The seven ex-prisoners were fêted at a plentiful repast, being pressed to remain as the guest of Itoma for many days.

They begged, with some haste, to be excused, whereupon Itoma agreed to their being escorted riverwards at once, and there furnished with a canoe in which they might ac-

comply with their return to the coast. After this he unfastened the necklet from his throat, and, in sight of the gaping populace, handed it to Major Brand as a token of gratitude.

A heated murmuring broke forth. Jele, the sorcerer, sprang forward with fierce eyes, pointing to the necklet, and speaking volubly. But Itoma waved him aside, ordering the white men's rifles and belts to be restored. Torches were then brought, whereupon, in picturesque procession, they all set out for the river.

This being reached, a finely-made canoe was drawn alongside, and the seven embarked. As the rattan mooring was cast off Itoma leaned forward and whispered some earnest injunction in Tambo's ear. A moment later, pursued by a medley of shouts, the craft was thrust off on a sluggish current—and they were away.

"Anything wrong, Tambo?" queried the Major. "I don't quite like the sound of it. What was that nabob's parting message?"

"Him say we better paddle plenty quick, boss. That big fellow necklet him been give you belong one time to mighty Jele, the sorcerer; him want it back. Others take Jele's side; him plenty big power. Him may make trouble yet, a-like-a that, an' send war-boats on our trail!"

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"Confound!" exploded the Major. "I wish Itoma had kept his trumpery beads, for surely we don't want them. If I'd only known, I wouldn't have taken 'em!"

"More better as it is, boss," declared Tambo. "You been refused present, Itoma him grow angry then an' no let us go. Me been——"

Tambo stopped short to listen. The far-off voices had died, gradually merged into the whispering night, so that nothing lived save the squeak of bats and the twitter of night-birds. But now——

"It is so!" broke forth Tambo. "Boss, we been followed! Quick, quick!"

Pursuit was indeed upon them. There was a muffled *plunk, plunk* upon their ears which could mean nothing save the beat of many paddles. There was scarce a twist in the stream, so that Dick Brand, watching astern, was able soon to perceive a number of moving blots in the hazy gloom behind.

The belts and rifles lay beside him. Directed by his father, he loaded up and got a barrel cocked over.

"Fire, boy, as soon as you've got a bead on 'em," panted the Major. "How are they now?"

"Pretty close," answered Dick, his teeth hard set. With steady aim he launched a

rattle of lead. Shrieks rent the night, but a sudden turn blocked out the view, and then——

Crash !

Disaster so complete and swift had surely never fallen before. One moment the fugitives had been skimming fleetly on the current, the next their frail bark was completely split asunder, and they were flung sprawling amid a cluck of wild water and upon a craggy bed of stones.

Lad Murray came off best, though with countless bruises, in the middle of the barrier, which was really a gritty islet, and he had managed to snatch a couple of belts and rifles from the splintered canoe.

Meanwhile the pursuing craft—three huge war-boats, with carved and upraised prows—had surged round the bend. Two were being rushed inshore, but the third was fetched broadside on against the stony barrier. Out from the latter came whizzing a shower of poisoned arrows, accompanied by a din of ear-splitting howls.

Lad Murray, backing away, blundered into Major Brand and the bos'n. To them, hurriedly, he gave the two rifles, and, having won some sort of stand in the roaring side-channel, they opened up a shattering fire. The nearest of the foe withered before it, pitching over-

board, but those ashore were now speeding their shafts from the dense cover of the bush.

The rifles blazed back at venture, while full many agile forms came leaping on to the boulders. It was touch and go. Dick Brand and O'Flannel, a little below, were floundering in the shallows, and Dick's fingers presently struck upon a sound and familiar gunwale.

"The whale-boat!" roared he. "Our own whale-boat! This way, all of you! This way for your lives!"

Tim's hunting-knife was handy, and he slashed the half-seen painter, while the others came hacking a path.

The rest was sheer confusion. Somehow, to a renewed spitting of rifles and a purr of arrows, that whale-boat heaved out to the middle flow. Once under way there was no holding her. For a few tense moments they ran the gauntlet, and then they were wholly clear. Once more the tumult died. With six oars strongly dipping, our friends bent to the task and rowed as they had never rowed before.

Mr. Dennis Forth, younger partner in the firm of Clegg and Forth, boat-builders of Brisbane, sat in his office with tucked shirt-sleeves. "Come in!" grunted he, in response to a knock. "Well, what do you want?"

"I've come back, Mr. Dennis. If my bench is still empty, I'd like to take on again."

Forth whipped the cigar from his mouth and jerked round. "Lad Murray!" exclaimed he. "You young villain—where have you been?"

Lad related the stirring facts as briefly as he could. Mr. Dennis Forth, full-blooded, a lover of the wild, wriggled in his chair. "Oh, great!" was his comment. "Just great! Well, it was worth doing, boy. You've seen a bit of life, anyhow."

"Yes, and I've brought back this. Everybody else despised it, so I thought I'd nail on."

Lad dropped upon the desk a tinkling string of beads and teeth and shells. It was the Kwali necklet. Mr. Forth fingered this bauble idly, then suddenly made a pounce.

"Do you think I might sell the thing," asked Lad, "for a shilling or two? If so, I'd spend that coin on tobacco as a little treat for my mates of the brig. She's lying in wharf now."

"Very well," said Mr. Forth. "I'll buy." He slit the gut with a penknife, running off the trinkets into a letter-tray. Amid the rest were quite a number of big round beads. The real nature of these had escaped even Major Brand's notice, for they were of a dull black appearance,

and seemingly worthless. That blackness, however, really a native paint, had rubbed off in patches while lying in Lad's pocket, and so, here and there, was revealed a glint of red, shot with green and pink and turquoise. All these "beads" the shipwright collected in the palm of his left hand. "Three shillings?" he queried.

"Right you are, sir."

Then Mr. Forth exploded. "You—you *stupendous* young ass! Haven't you the sense, now, to see that they're opals? Opals, boy—*opals!*"

Lad gasped.

"Shall I tell you what they're worth, child? Would your innocence like to know?"

"Y-yes, of course——"

"Why, they're worth five thousand pounds, if they're worth a penny!"

Lad stared as in a daze and, before he could fully recover, he was being whisked off by the impetuous Mr. Forth to some imposing glazed doors a couple of streets away. These doors gave into the depot of a world-famous firm, one branch of whose business was to "deal" in raw gems.

A little, precise manager came forward, his eyes sparkling behind pebble glasses at sight of so lustrous a handful, for all the black had

now been rubbed off. But, professionally cautious, the man hummed and hawed. Yes, the stones were nice—quite nice. Markets, however, were so fickle in regard to these uncommon hues. He could not, without consulting his London agent, offer more than eight thousand pounds——

The deal was clinched right there, after which Lad Murray, still in the tow of Mr. Forth—who could not possibly have been happier even if the windfall had been his—made a triumphant descent upon the good ship *Prudence*.

Captain Begg, Ben Inch, and Tambo were in the throes of unloading, while Major Brand and Dick had drawn aside to consult. This, as a Quest, ranked as their first distinct failure, and they were very sorry indeed for their companions in the venture, especially for young Lad.

They had done so well themselves in previous Quests that they could afford to be generous, and they were just about to suggest something when Mr. Forth and Lad Murray excitedly arrived. All were wafted towards the brig's cuddy, and there let into the amazing truth. Finally, having ransacked the ship's larder, they all sat down to celebrate, and to make a mutual division of riches. Major Brand,

though pressed, refused to participate, but he wound up with a cheerful toast.

“Gentlemen,” beamed he, uplifting his mug, “here’s luck to Kwali’s treasure. May you all live long to enjoy it ! ”

QUEST FIVE

THE REPAL IVORIES

“**B**EAUTIFUL!”

It was not the first time Sir Philip Brand had used this term in reference to his miniature ivories, and probably it would not be the last. Sir Philip, as yet, was far from being an old man, but his exquisite collection became more of a solace to him every day—he even hoped that the Repal set would help him to forget that this would be another Christmas spent alone.

“The most perfect set in the world!” murmured he, as he carefully picked up the tray and carried it to the window. “As a carver of ivory Auguste Repal stood unchallenged. Unknown except to a few, he was a magician. There can never be another like him . . . Hullo! Why, bless my soul, the sun’s shining!”

Sir Philip, looking out that morning upon a white world, had congratulated himself on

living to see another old-fashioned Christmas ; but when the flakes continued to fall thickly, and drifts were reported in various parts of the park, he felt less cause for satisfaction. Being a methodical man, he did not like his walks interfered with. But this glimpse of wintry sunlight, though late in the day, created a new aspect.

“ Here’s for an outing ! ” thought he. “ What should one fear when shod with a thick pair of boots ? ”

He closed up his precious tray—which, being fitted with a lid, now became an oblong rose-wood box. This box, in turn, became a sort of drawer, filling its appointed gap in a cabinet. The latter had folding doors which, duly locked, shut up the whole collection.

Sir Philip rang a bell, and was soon provided with the outdoor gear he needed. Then he walked to the front of the house, passed through the main portals, and so down the terrace steps.

He paused a moment, for, with the whole sweep of parkland before him, the outlook was more severe here than at the rear of the house. But numerous clumps of trees, for which Willard Park was famous, relieved what might otherwise have been a dreary waste of whiteness. Sir Philip was about to turn when a faint buzzing caught his ears.

He gazed up, to behold an aeroplane high up in the heavens, moving slowly like a phantom bird. It appeared to slacken, gliding on without the slightest sound. Its shining silver cowl turned downward. In dead silence it began to drift, drift.

“ Why, it’s falling into the park ! ”

The machine, however, did not exactly fall. Though alighting at a sharpish angle, it never quite lost its buoyancy. Its main skids struck, then its disc-wheels, but, thanks to a shock absorber, there was no visible jar. The ’plane came to rest like a tired bird, perching just at the head of the steep slope—exactly opposite the house, yet some good distance from it.

Nothing further happened. Sir Philip Brand stood with his eyes fixed steadily on the visitant, conning the white, graceful lines of it—waiting, in fact, for its pilot to exhibit himself and alight.

But such a thing did not happen—nothing, indeed, happened. The spectral craft just remained there, uncannily still. Sir Philip, conscious of a misgiving, at length walked towards it. Arrived at the spot, he put his foot on the port skid, clambered a little, and peeped in. The cockpit was empty !

Sir Philip felt as though he had trodden on nothing. He felt, indeed, like a swimmer abruptly out of his depth. “ Bless my heart ! ”

he muttered. Then again, " Bless my heart ! " So ghostly was the impression received that he banged the knob of his stick on the fuselage plates and on the decking formers. They were all solid enough, and the bracing wires rang to his touch like the chords of a harp. Yet——

In a sudden flurry Sir Philip jumped down and hurried towards the house. On passing through the lobby he shouted for upwards of a minute before Bannock and other servants came running in response.

" Are ye all asleep ? " cried Sir Philip, his testiness aroused. " Why, I began to fear the house was abandoned as well. Come you out with me and see a miracle ! There's an aircraft in the park that flies by itself ! Never have you known the like, Bannock. I saw it alight with my own eyes, never removing my gaze ! Yet, on peering in, I find not a soul aboard. As empty as a blown egg, Bannock. Come you out and look ! "

Sir Philip hurried forth at once, the excitement in his tones urging all the men-servants to follow. As for the women-folk, they came stealing to the front and gathered at the windows.

" Now, I wish you to examine it thoroughly," said Sir Philip, when the machine was reached.

“Overhaul it, my masters, bow and stern. Blake, you are active. Swarm over the top!”

The scrutiny, lasting full ten minutes, seemed fairly thorough. By that time the sun had sunk, and snow was threatening again.

“There’s naught odd about her, sir, as I can see,” said Bannock, in whom lingered a countryman’s suspicion of any machinery that flew. “All airypplanes ’re bewitched, to my way o’ thinking. Let her be, is my advice. Here comes more snow.”

The whole throng, perhaps, affected by Bannock’s advice, were not loath to retreat, though Blake, to be helpful, suggested the telephone.

“Excellent!” approved Sir Philip, as they re-entered the hall. “I’ll ring up Constable Dixon. Please stand by.”

They stood by, but presently there was a scream from the maids. The latter had quitted the window, but one, edging back for a last quiz, had espied some motion—the spinning of a propeller. Then,—

“It’s going, sir!” cried she. “It’s going of its own accord!”

All crowded to catch a view, and sure enough they saw that weird ’plane tip, as it were, over the slope, skim downhill, and then heave lightly off the snow. A shower of icy crystals

left the still-spinning wheels as it climbed into the sky. The 'plane was still climbing when the murk enveloped it and it faded from view.

"The like of that," said Bannock huskily, "may I never see again!"

There was something deeper than amazement in the butler's tone, and Sir Philip, who, on a life-long principle, discouraged superstition, could find no word to say. At last he said "Humph!" several times in succession, stumping up and down the hall and revisiting windows to scan the dusky sky. There was, however, no further sign of aerial phantoms, so he ordered candles to be lit in his "snuggery" at the rear. He followed Bannock in, and sat down to remove his snowy boots.

The glow of the candles spread forth, yet, ere they were all lit, the butler started back so that he crashed a foot amid the fire-irons on the hearth. He was pointing—jabbing with a finger, rather—unable to speak.

Sir Philip took notice, and he beheld the door of his treasure cabinet burst open—splintered, in fact—with a drawer space left vacant.

Sir Philip stumbled to his feet—one boot, one carpet slipper—and his fingers clenched. "Gone!" gasped he. "My Repal ivories. Gone! Gone! Stolen!"

There followed a spell of complete blankness, and then, as was natural, Sir Philip sought to connect the two mysteries—that of the phantom aeroplane, and this of the missing valuables. Yet the more he pondered the more puzzled he became, till at length he burst out with,—

“ I must see my brother about this—at once ! Adventure is his hobby. He undertakes Quests in all parts of the world, so here is one for him at home. The ivories—he shall quest for those. But it’s baffling—baffling ! Bannock, have the car brought round at once ! ”

Now, twelve miles nearer the Suffolk coast, as the crow flies, lay Broadlands, the home of Major Brand, Sir Philip’s younger brother. The storm king here had been less lavish as yet with his “ icy morsels,” for snow lay barely an inch thick. Indeed, some parts of Broadlands showed green in patches, and in one such patch we discover the Major and two stalwart youths. One of these is his own son, and the other an old school pal of Dick’s, Rob MacKirk. Both these, by way of being quite at home, had donned their old school caps. They were seated on the low bough of a spreading tree, Dick having just heard there was no invitation this year for them to spend Christmas at Willard Park.

"But we've been going there every Christmas for as long as I can remember," exclaimed Dick, "except, of course, when we were abroad. Need we wait for an invitation? Don't you think that Uncle Phil is expecting us?"

Major Brand shook his head, smiling grimly. "I fear not," he said.

"Why? You haven't somehow offended him?"

"Yes, Dick, I'm afraid I have." The speaker thoughtfully knocked out his pipe against the tree-trunk. "It was a trivial matter really," continued he, "but your uncle's a bit touchy. I ventured to offer him some advice."

"That *was* a mistake!" grinned Dick. "What was it all about?"

"Oh, some fellow named de Geyt whom Philip met in London. De Geyt posed as a connoisseur of miniature ivories, and Philip thought of asking him down to Willard. Certain rumours, however, reached me about this de Geyt, so I told your uncle he'd better not encourage the man. In fact, I rather pressed the matter, and Philip, as a consequence, lost his temper. He said some hasty things, and parted from me in a huff."

"How absurd!" growled Dick.

"Of course it's absurd. What's more, de

Geyt stayed at Willard, and I don't know that any ill has come of it ! . . . I'm sorry for you fellows. If this sort of weather continues there ought to be some fine skating on Willard Pool. . . . Hullo ! more snow—and, I say, it's growing dark. What about going in for a game of billiards before——”

The speaker stopped, his eyes fixed on the glooming sky. The boys, following his gaze, perceived a floating silhouette—the shapely form of an aeroplane. It dropped lower as it reached above their boundaries, yet they could detect no noise. It faltered, and now—like a huge, drowsy moth against the wintry sky—it seemed to lose all life. It swept to earth on a long volplane, skilfully tilted, and settled lightly within a few hundred yards of where they sat.

“ Hullo ! ” Major Brand rose to his feet. “ Does our pilot shy at the weather, or has he lost his way ? Why, where *is* the man ? Can you see him ? ”

“ No, I see no sign of any one,” answered Rob MacKirk.

Then they all approached the mysterious 'plane, trotting as they drew near. The Major drew himself up to peer into the cockpit. He uttered a breath of amaze.

“ There's not a soul here ! ” exclaimed he. “ The machine's empty ! ”

The two boys also looked, then stared at each other.

"There can be but one explanation," muttered the Major. "The pilot, somehow, must have fallen out some way back, since which the machine must have flown herself till she lost poise and dropped."

"Never heard of such a thing," said Dick.

"Nor I; yet it's worth the testing. We must spread back over the country and make a search. Where are those two old lanterns that used to hang in the stable?"

"I think they were carried into the house, or else shoved in the loft. I'm not sure."

"Let's hunt round. It'll be dark in a few minutes, so we must carry lights. Come—both of you!"

Turning, they all ran back to the house. Dick, parting from the others, was off for the stable, when a low purring caused all to swing round.

"Look! Look!" gasped Dick.

The amazing 'plane was moving. They could just see the spin of its screw in the deepening dusk. The disc-wheels of the chassis crept at first, as if unwillingly, but soon they gathered momentum. The prow of the craft lifted; soon it was off the ground and soaring, though at a tangent from its original course. Then

the flight steadied ; the machine came round on a more deliberate curve, and headed for the coast-line.

“ Good grief ! the blessed thing’s haunted. She must have a spook at the helm ! ”

This exclamation was Rob’s ; no other comment was offered. The father and the son stood there in statuesque attitudes ; they did not budge—they merely waited while that eerie aircraft melted into the shades of night ; but at the last moment the white ’plane wavered, doing something like a nose dive.

“ Did you see that ? ” rapped out the Major.

“ Yes, she’s down again.”

“ Where ? ”

“ On Holly Hill for a wager—bang on the bare crest of it ! We can get there in ten minutes. Come on ! Come on ! ”

The excited Dick rushed off as he shouted, but his father halted to catch at Rob’s arm.

“ You go in, boy, and find Tim O’Flannel. Ask him for that other lantern. We’re sure to need it. Come quickly, then, and join us on the hill ! ”

“ Right-o ! ”

Rob darted back, while the Major braced himself to follow Dick. There was a hard, well-made road which curled from the Broad-

lands gate to the very foot of Holly Hill. But the impetuous Dick had no use at the moment for any route other than a bee-line, and the Major—though many years had passed since his last steeplechase—relied on his hard condition and was bold to follow.

He could see the boy's form running across two whitely sprinkled meadows, across a strip of heath, and then across the road. Beyond that was a gully which the Major approached with caution, to find it half clogged with slushy snow. But Dick had forded somehow, so his sire followed suit. The bushes above his head were swishing and crackling, token that Dick still held an unswerving course. The senior set his jaw and butted upward.

This was the time-honoured hill which for countless years had provided Broadlands with its festive greenery. The younger pair, but a few hours since, had come home loaded, and loud in appreciation: "The thickest crowd of hollies on earth!" Major Brand, at this moment, pricked deeply in every inch of his person, was ready to affirm the claim. Still, it was mild compared with the tropic jungles, and the Major did so well that he scratched through to the open crest almost as soon as Dick. The latter was a few yards ahead, sprinting hard for the motionless aircraft, now,

indeed, a phantom shape against the darkling drapery of night. Dick was hanging over the cockpit when his senior arrived.

“ Well ? ”

“ Empty. This leaves one staggered ! . . . Wait, though ! I think I’ve solved the mystery ! ”

“ Let me—” Major Brand, still panting, stopped short and pointed over the hill. “ What was that ? ” exclaimed he. “ I thought I saw some shadow dart into that holly brake beyond. Quick, boy—run ! There—in the direction I point.”

Dick was smart to obey, and his smartness caused that lurking shadow to utter an expletive. For the shadow was pretty solid, being actually the body of a man. Beneath his arm he hugged a hard, oblong object. With regard to this he acted on impulse. Having noted his bearings, he hurled the object into a holly bush and then bolted away.

“ You’re right, Dad ; there’s some one here ! Round the other side ! Head him off ! ”

The unknown prowler, after a skirmish with the hollies, swung back and nearly plunged into Dick’s arms. The last-named, in fact, received a jolt which left him floundering in a snow-drift. But, as he rolled, so he rose and went off full-tilt after his man.

“Look out, Pater! Your way!”

With a show of surprise tactics, however, the man doubled and charged back. Dick flew at him and got his thighs in a true Rugger grip. The pair collapsed, the man shooting head first and spread-eagling on the snowy slope. He tried to kick free, but, failing in that, squirmed round to use his fists.

Dick certainly had caught a Tartar. The steely vigour in the man's limbs taxed all his powers of grip. He strove not to loose his hold, but bony knuckles crashed to the jaw compelled this at last. Dick flung himself forward again, but a second wild set-to left him windless—for the moment *hors de combat*. At that same instant Major Brand came pounding round the hill.

Meanwhile, back at Broadlands, Tim O'Flannel sought for lanterns from roof to cellar. He found one at length, a battered specimen, and proceeded to stick in a bit of candle. He and Rob MacKirk, thus ready, were just darting into the open, when an automobile was seen bowling up the drive. From this Sir Philip Brand emerged. He seemed agitated.

“That O'Flannel?” exclaimed he.

“It's meself, sor,” answered Tim. “Is aught amiss?”

“ My Repal ivories have vanished in most odd circumstances. I am half disposed to connect their loss with the visit of an aeroplane ! It—it was all most queer ; I can’t stop to explain now, but the aircraft, when last seen, was winging over in this direction. I rushed along to inform my brother, and in the faint hope that you, perhaps, saw something of this weird biplane.”

“ We saw it all right,” answered Rob. “ It dropped down here.”

“ Here—here in these grounds ? ”

“ Yes, and we had a jolly good look at it.”

“ You mean—who was aboard it ? ”

“ No one. It was empty ! ”

“ Good powers ! I—well, I’m a plain man, but upon my soul this makes me creepy. Did—don’t tell me the thing flew off again of its own accord ! ”

“ It did, and fell soon after on Holly Hill—at least, so we think. The Major and Dick have run on. We were just off there, too, with this.”

• Rob held up the lantern, which he had taken from Tim’s hand.

“ Then jump in. We can do it more rapidly by car. Swing her round, Reed, then let’s have top speed ! ”

They were beneath the hill of hollies in a

few minutes, and had just struggled over the gully when an echo of voices—short, breathless notes—sounded from above.

Rob MacKirk and Sir Philip led, climbing up in that direction to perceive a tussle in progress on the near side of the hill. The two striving bodies appeared to collapse, and on the top of them sprang another. The newcomers arrived as this breathless trio hove to their feet, and a somewhat cultured voice, with a sleekness in it, said,—

“Pray, sirs, consider this finished. I declare myself your prisoner.”

The speaker stood up straight between Dick Brand and his father. He was dark and slim, something of a dandy. The overalls he wore, having torn loose, revealed clothes of a foreign cut. All this could dimly be seen in the glow of Rob’s lantern.

“Did *you* steal my ivories?” barked Sir Philip Brand, going straight to the point.

“It is the same thing,” bowed the stranger, with a gleam of good teeth. “I took them.”

“You thieved them, you rascal!”

“If monsieur persists, yes. Permit me to explain.”

“You’d better. Who are you?”

“A half-brother of Maurice de Geyt—the person who lately enjoyed your hospitality.

During his visit, I understand, he made you an offer—a handsome offer—for your set of Repals ? ”

“ That’s as may be,” growled Sir Philip. “ The offer he made, handsome or not, I refused.”

“ Quite, quite ! Now Maurice is, as you might vulgarly call it, a dealer. He and I work together. A gentleman we trade with offered us a princely sum for a perfect set of Repals. Believe me, it was an overwhelming fee, and one of which we both stood in need. This happened at Boulogne last night. There was one condition : our client would ask no questions, but the ivories must be in his hands by to-morrow morning. Maurice spoke to me about it. Could anything be done ? I said yes—there was one chance.” The speaker paused to take a cigarette from his case. “ I am an aviator,” he went on. “ I obtained, in peculiar circumstances, and adapted a machine. The designer originally provided for a tiny cabin behind the cockpit. A back panel was left loose. I perceived how useful this might prove to me, and I had a catch fitted. It was a whim that amused me. In two seconds, behold, I could disappear ; in two seconds I could be back in my seat ! So simple—so neat ! ”

The cracksman laughed, eyeing his cigarette.

"I flew to Willard Park with an open mind," he proceeded. "In my pocket was a plan of the house, carefully prepared by Maurice. It looked so easy that I did not bother. It was not, indeed, till I actually caught sight of you, sir, standing in the park, that the idea of using my 'vanishing trick' came into mind. I acted on the spur of the moment; the rest, as you would say, worked itself."

The speaker took out a match-case, only to find it empty. As he fumbled in another pocket he continued,—

"When you ran to the house, Sir Philip, I hopped out and dived among a near clump of trees. In the diversion this caused, and still covered by trees, I flitted round to the back, used deft tools, and secured that case of Repals within five minutes. It was so beautiful—so adroit!

"I was back amid the first tree-clump when a threat of snow drove you all in. Had any one of you looked round then you must have seen me. But you did not. *Pouf!*—I was away! A dozen good miles, and then, alas, luck failed me! My engine stopped."

"Why?"

"A faulty petrol supply. Nothing serious, yet I was forced to descend, and, to avoid

answering questions, I was prompt to disappear. Left alone, I remedied the trouble well enough to get away, but soon there was another stoppage. Down I came on this hill, and tackled the defect in earnest. I believe I had just got it right when this young sir appeared. I was then standing on the off side of the machine. There was no time to get in ; I made a bolt for cover ; I was seen, and—here I am.”

“ Yes,” burst forth Sir Philip, “ but where are the ivories ? ”

“ Safe, sir, thoroughly safe ; I will soon restore them to you. Ah, but what I need is a match ! My friend, I beg you, allow me to light.”

Rob, unsuspecting, opened the lantern and held it up. The adventurer stooped to apply his cigarette. He was very cool about it. He made one puff, then—*crash* ! In a tick of time he had dashed his fist into the lantern, smashed it to the ground, and created instant darkness. In that same thrill of diversion he broke away, dashing amid the bushes.

“ After him ! Quick ! Quick ! He mustn’t escape ! ”

This was all very well, but if a runaway ever had a chance of escaping, it was on Holly Hill. The place, especially for pursuit purposes, and

at night, was a maze—moreover, the most prickly maze in the country.

The two boys plunged into it with a will, but at best it was a blind struggle. They scrambled this way and that, blundering into each other, and shouting to help the excitement.

“ I think he went up ! ” yelled Dick.

“ No, no—down. Towards the gully ! ”

A bramble-brake would have been easier, for they might have seen over the top. Here most of the bushes were head high, or taller, so that they could only be guided by sound, and the latter, with five folk trampling about, could not in the least be trusted.

“ Downward ! ” roared Tim O’Flannel.
“ The black traitor ! I see him ! ”

This news was distinctly better, and promptly accepted by all. They pounded downward, dodging disaster as best they could. Rob MacKirk, reckless of scars, tore a direct course, leapt the last bit of scrub, and landed plump on his quarry’s back. They tottered, dropping head first into the slush of the gully.

The next minute or so was a shade too mad to describe. Rob, for a moment, got the best of the tussle, but he then got the worst of the snow. Indeed, his mouth became full of it, plus his eyes and one ear. When he

wallowed up it was to see his man taking off into the hollies again. Then the old chorus of queries,—

“ Which way ? Which way ? ”

Rob strove to direct them, but wrongly, for as they groped, all pretty much at fault, the whirr of an airscrew sounded from the heights.

“ Do you hear that ? He’s slipping us ! He’s slipping ! The ivories ! ”

Whereon they put their final best into it, and swarmed up the rise. When they glimpsed the aeroplane it was off the ground and rising rapidly. Ghostly to the last, still vaguely a phantom, it dwindled into the night.

“ Beaten ! To think of it ! The Repals ! Gone ! ”

Thus, for many minutes, they stood there, Sir Philip loud in interjections. Then, in a sort of baffled silence, they began to drift down the hill. As they were getting into the car they heard Dick shouting from the top.

“ Go on to Broadlands ! ” voiced he. “ I’ll see you later. This Quest isn’t finished yet.”

They couldn’t guess what he meant, but they drove back, and Sir Philip, at the house, was still lamenting his loss, when Dick excitedly arrived.

“ All serene, uncle ! ” he cried. “ I saw that

chap fling something into a bush. He didn't know I twigged, so perhaps he'll return for it later. But he'll be disappointed—for it's already salved. See ? ”

The boy held up an oblong rosewood case.

“ The Repal ivories ! ” gasped Sir Philip. Then, after an eloquent pause, “ We must celebrate this at Willard Park—as usual. Agreed ? ”

“ Rather ! ” declared the boys.

“ Then all's well. Here's wishing us a good old Christmas ! ”

QUEST SIX

THE RIVER OF TIBET

LEAPING, gurgling, foaming, the unbridled torrent of water—tons and tons of it, precipitated in one vast, overwhelming deluge—clove betwixt the bastions of rock, and went thundering into the black abyss below. It was a terrible, an awesome thing to look at. Great pine trees cowered before it and perished, being torn up by the roots and hurled into the vapouring chasm. Even the rocky gap itself began to crumble, broadening out till the entire hillside became nothing but a roaring cataract. Then—*click*—the whole spectacle came suddenly to an end. The film had run its course, and the auditorium lights were turned up amid tumultuous applause. Professor Ainslie's famous lecture on "Rivers, Floods, and Waterfalls" was brought to a triumphant close.

"Great!" exclaimed Dick Brand. "That's the most topping show we've seen since coming to New York. What say you, Dad?"

"True," answered Major Brand heartily. "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. But come along—we mustn't keep the illustrious lecturer waiting."

A few minutes later both father and son were sitting with Professor Ainslie in a cosy lounge at the back of the hall. The great savant's eyes glittered yet with the enthusiasm of his recent discourse.

"Well, what did you think of it?" beamed he.

"Capital. As for those films, they're stupendous. Who took them, I wonder?"

"They were taken by Ellis V. Heel, my own operator. Heel is a man of your own stamp; he and his camera are ready to set out at any moment for the wilds of nowhere, provided there is something startling to be bagged in the way of moving water. But even Heel has his limits; at all events, there is one venture which I cannot allow him to tackle alone. That is why I cabled to you. I want to know if, in the cause of discovery, you are ready to lead the way?"

"Where is the hunting-ground?"

"A sort of no-man's-land on the fringes of Burma and Tibet. I fancy you were once stationed in Farther India?"

"That's so."

"You know the Kachin tongue?"

“Quite well. I also know that that is one of the most fiendish regions on earth. It is overrun by dacoits who are malevolent to the core. Mingled with their natural bent for robbery and violence there is a fanatical hatred for everything white and civilized. Human life in that corner of creation is not worth the snap of a finger.”

“Ah! Well, I am glad you understand. Now, here is a map of Indo-China; you will note that the higher reaches of these several rivers are merely a trail of dots, for their sources have never been surveyed. Now, here in the midst of them is a little range of mountains shaped something like a fat cigar. It is indicated as being of solid formation; but the rumour goes that it is really hollow—that, in fact, it encloses a fertile valley, where dwell a lost tribe of people known as the Swergas.”

Major Brand laughed, shaking his head.

“I have heard that Swerga story before,” said he drily.

“You are one of the sceptics?”

“Perhaps. Let me think. Aren’t these Swergas supposed to be bell-worshippers?”

“That is where they get their title; they are said to worship a big brazen object known as the bell of Swerga—meaning, I believe, the bell of heaven. But by all accounts they fall

sadly short of these celestial pretensions. From their fastness amid the hills they carry raids of a most bloodthirsty kind into the Burmese villages below. Their pitiless leader, Boh Gogra, is alleged to bear a charmed life. Indeed, none of these wretches as yet have paid for their crimes—and this is due to the fact that their haunt is impregnable. The only access to the Swerga valley is by means of a secret tunnel known only to themselves.”

“The barrier-cliff, you mean, is unscalable at every point?”

“That’s the story.”

“I’m loath to believe it.”

“So am I. But now let me hurry to the point. On that screen just now you saw great volumes of water in a score of varying moods; you saw it spinning, receding, rushing, and tumbling. But you did not see it *climbing*. On the face of it, you may ask, how *can* water climb? Yet I have it on the written oath of a Boston missionary—a man who fell into the clutches of these Swergas and escaped later, only to die as the result of tortures inflicted—I have it under his sworn word that a mighty current flowing through the Swerga hinterland actually *climbs up* a steep slope and afterwards continues its journey north-east. Now, what do you say to that?”

“Phenomenal! As soon as I’ve seen it I shall believe.”

“True. Again and again I have tried to thrust the idea away from me as being the veriest balderdash. Yet—well, what *do* we know about the laws of Nature? Much—and nothing! If this miraculous river really exists, it must be the eighth wonder of the world. To the kinema artist who brings home a film of it my society would pay ten thousand dollars; to the leader of the expedition they would award a like amount. Apart from which, of course, this is an epoch-making chance. The question is—do you care to grasp it?”

Major Brand rose abruptly and reached for his hat. “I’m your man,” he said. “I’ve no faith in this marvellous river; but I’m going to settle the Swerga myth once and for all. Communicate with the intrepid Mr. Heel, and ’phone my hotel. I shall be ready to sail to-morrow evening.”

The broken spurs of the Himalayas stretched away on the west; on the east the long ridges of beetling hillside cut up from the far Shan States of Tibet. A majestic panorama of awakening vegetation arose in bushy shelves towards a receding snow-line; yet the mant-

ling of dark-green conifer and a blaze of rhododendron did little to mitigate the severity of the frost-bound heights above. Against those icy walls, rearing almost perpendicular, a trail of minute blotches crept up and up in slow and painful stages.

"My crackey!" puffed Ellis V. Heel, his lean, sinewy features blue-pink with cold and exertion. "This beats our khud-side to a frazzle. But see here, Mage, have we got to shin up *that*?"

"I suppose so," grunted Major Brand; "we must follow where Hirda Khan leads."

Hirda Khan—one of the hard-limbed *kuki*, or hillmen, from the Khasia heights beyond—had a very reliable instinct for the job he had undertaken. His pugaree bobbed forth presently as they scraped towards the brink, and his wiry brown arms, like thongs of steel, stretched down to hoist them over. Then they understood, for they found themselves sprawled upon a glittering scarp that rose in successive waves to the snow-capped rocks of the summit.

"See, Sahib!" cried the guide. "The top is in sight. In the time that it takes to boil a pot of rice we shall be there. Then shall we know of the hidden things."

Hirda Khan's enthusiasm was rather agree-

able, especially in view of the fact that this formidable range, with its evil traditions, was held in deadly awe by every native whom our party had met since leaving their mules and ponies at the last friendly village.

This village but four days before had suffered loot and horrible bloodshed from dacoity—carried out, as all avowed, by the mysterious and elusive Swergas. The *thugi*, or headman—whose own daughter had been among the victims—pleaded eloquently with his visitors to leave “that accursed mountain” alone. Hirda Khan may have forgotten all this, but the grass-shod coolies had not. They trembled with fear as they were led yet higher; and a sudden “Look, look!”—shrilly from Dick—caused them nearly to jump out of their tattered rags.

“What is it?” growled the Major testily.

“I saw a head!” whispered Dick. “It rose above one of those snags. A most vile-looking——”

Gripping his father’s arm, Dick pointed to the crags above, and as he did so those crags appeared to totter. Next instant an ice-bound boulder broke free and came whizzing down-slope, after which, with a dreadful cracking, the entire ridge crumbled and came bounding upon them!

Hirda Khan shouted some wild advice ; but the whole party, obeying their several instincts, flung themselves right and left, or else swung round in a grovelling downhill retreat.

Dick Brand had fallen over Tim O'Flannel, and even as he swayed a great bulk of frozen granite smote him in the chest and knocked him head first with irresistible force. Gyrating, his body gathered impetus till he was part and parcel of the general landslide. Unseen masses rumbled about him, while glassy particles cut his cheeks and ground his palms.

Involuntarily he clutched and clutched, till at length he had squeezed to a stoppage. But the subsidence of rock thundered on, bruising his limbs and battering out his breath. Half-stunned, he sprawled where he had stopped, inert to all things till a furious rattle of rifles made him pull grimly together and throw a glance uphill.


A terrible fight was in progress, for, hard on the cataclysm, some score of brown-limbed foemen—clad only in bands of bark-cloth—had leapt upon the scattered few. These latter, however, skilled by long practice in the art of swiftly “ getting together,” had lined up with unslung rifles, and were now emptying their magazines with potent effect.

All this Dick saw in one glimpse; and the next thing he knew was that a visage of revolting ugliness had bobbed up from the middle of the débris followed by a lithe body. At the same moment the boy realized that he was lying within a bare yard of that very chasm which had caused so much earlier anxiety. Struggling to his feet, he plunged inward, and as he did so the first swoop of a chopper-like blade missed his brow by inches.

Gritting his teeth, Dick closed, taking his man low down with the tripping hug of a Rugby half. They crashed together, and somehow the boy got on to that striking arm. For a space of time he held it, but his strength was insufficient. As they squirmed towards the gorge he was again dashed aside, his palm, as it happened, almost closing on a stony fragment of some several pounds in weight. The rest was done with the celerity of desperation.

Snatching up the granite block, Dick jumped to his full height and hurled the missile with all the vigour of his two arms. He threw, knowing that his very life depended on the aim. It took the man with such ramrod force on the jaw that it probably broke his neck. However that may be, he certainly went straight out of existence by dropping into the defile.

The fight uphill by now was dissolving in a



final hot skirmish, and Dick, clambering breathlessly, got there in time to take a hand in driving the foe to cover. As sure-footed as goats, they went leaping from nook to cranny, and soon there was not a trace of them left save the eight or nine that lay slain.

"Are we all sound?" rapped forth Major Brand; and then, partially assured, he added, "But where's Hirda Khan and the coolies?"

Hirda Khan, who had been fighting like a demon but two minutes ago, was at this moment well over the scarp and yelling at the top of his voice.

"Those coolies!" gasped Tim O'Flannel. "The spalpeens have bolted!"

This was all too true; for the most part, indeed, having started with the landslide, those porters had never stopped, and now, with packs still strapped to their shoulders, they were reeling and slithering on the khud-side far below. A few during the battle had remained cowering near by, but these, having flung off their burdens, were completing the mad stampede. Hirda Khan threatened and pleaded, but to no effect.

"Bah!" observed Ellis V. Heel, "let 'em run. This coolie stuff ain't no more use than a potato bug. They've left the movie outfit, and there's our ration-box and rifles. What more do we need? Come on!"

So the uptake was smartly resumed, Tim O'Flannel being called upon to out with his ice-axe and smite a passage through the ridge of frosted snow that over-eaved the topmost brink. Soon the whole party had struggled through—and the range was actually conquered.

"Sing hooray!" cried Ellis V. Heel. "If here ain't the blest lost valley! We're one up, and that's sure; just hand out your spy-glass, Mage."

Major Brand unbuckled his case, while a thrill of excitement went through them all. A fair, rectangular valley, jungle-clad, lay mapped at their feet, the terminating sides of which pared in to a sharp point. The lake-like waters of a jheel glimmered in the middle distance, and beyond this could be seen the winding course of a swift river—fed, as it seemed, by innumerable cascades.

It was an enchanting scene, and Heel without more ado set up his camera, running off some two hundred feet of film.

This man was now like a hound on the scent—all thought of peril being merged and lost in a thrill of professional joy. Re-boxing the camera, he shouldered it himself, and set off down-slope at the double.

"Keep ahead," shouted the Major to Hirda

Khan, "and be very watchful. Choose the open if you can."

The guide did his best to obey, though it was difficult, for these inner slopes were simply a welter of vegetation. The snow-line ceased within a few feet of the crest, beneath which flourished grass and laurel shrub in ever-widening patches.

Four thousand feet lower the air became humid, while the surroundings became more tropical with every step they took. Dwarf palms began to appear, plantains, and gigantic rattans that lifted feathery plumes to the skies.

"We cannot reach the river, Sahib, without crossing some jungle," announced Hirda Khan.

"I understand that, but we must be on the alert—also quick. Even now, I've no doubt, those cut-throats are mustering forces. Is that a path I see?"

"Yes, Sahib."

"Then take it ; it seems fairly open."

They dived into the deep shadows of a bamboo brake, interspersed presently with enormous tree-ferns, gamboge, and tamarinds. A *jula*, or rope bridge, took them over a bubbling ravine, and soon a cane suspension bridge, roughly slung, delivered them over a wider watercourse. These, as they rightly judged,

were two of the countless currents that fed out to the mighty river beyond.

The voice of this great river was now in their ears, roaring up through the weave of the forest.

Suddenly the track steepened, curving to a hill, and up this Hirda Khan began to climb, with the others close behind. It was thus Hirda Khan who first viewed the amazing river, and he burst forth with, "Here it is! Here it is! Oh, Sahibs, we have succeeded! The climbing water!"

His hearers scrambled up, to view what Dick quite aptly described as "the sight of a life-time." Beneath their eyes was a river of water, smooth in its flowing yet incredibly swift. It dived powerfully into a valley, but there were no snags to break it, nor yet any obstacle to cause the least bubble of foam. That valley, indeed, was a perfect curve, so the river encountered no check. Even as it swept down on the one hand, so did it sweep *up* on the other, topping the farther curve, and then continuing its way.

No doubt this was less due to the speed of the current than to the exact conformation of its bed; and the rising slope, of course, was far less acute than the fall. But the river did actually *climb*—with an effect as weird to gaze upon as it was entirely wonderful.

“By the holy smoke!” said Ellis V. Heel, “now this is where I spread. Dear friends, you watch me get busy.”

Heel, as they soon discovered, was not going to be content with a little—he wanted just as much as he could carry. Having operated on the hill, he moved to other view-points and then to the shore itself. Soaked limbs did not matter now, nor yet deep thorn-gashes and ripped attire. It did not even signify if some few got dead and drowned, provided one good soul survived to take the photographs home!

Thus, in boggling, adventurous stages, they won at last to a splendid eminence at the other end of the scene, and from here Heel was able to focus the stream as it actually climbed to the camera. The handle was merrily at work, and all going well, when Hirda Khan broke out with,—

“Look, look!—the Swergas! They are skimming towards us on rafts!”

“Good grief!” rapped out Major Brand. “Is this valley of water navigable? If so, those brutes will be upon us in two twinkles of an eyelid.”

“They are coming!” shrilled Hirda Khan again. “Sahib Heel, do you not see? Quick, quick—you must hide at once!”

“Not me!” snorted Heel, with his eye fast glued to the view-finder. “I’ve been wondering all the while if a boat could make the passage; and now we’re going to see. Gee! If this really comes off, and I get a good picture, I reckon New York ’ll go mad.”

Meanwhile, four bamboo rafts—shaped plank-wise and lengthily constructed—were scudding lightly upon the level surface beyond. Coming straight on to the downward flush, they curt-sied daintily over and shot into the rushing abyss. Each raft was manned by a row of paddlers, and these, with skilful touches, maintained an unswerving course. There was no flurry and not the slightest floundering. As if on some liquid switchback, those four craft rose from the dip and took the ascent as cleanly as did the element beneath them.

A bloodcurdling yell, however, a minute or so before proclaimed that the white men were seen, and certain of the paddlers while yet in the hollow had relinquished their paddles to snatch up carbines and open a hurried fire. The best-aimed bullet sizzled through Heel’s topee; but, nothing daunted, apparently oblivious, he kept his machine buzzing on in an ecstasy of achievement.

The others, however, by no means so engrossed, had unlimbered arms and rushed to

the river's bank. By so doing, though quite unconsciously, they had rushed "into the picture," and now, as they returned blaze for blaze, it was borne upon the jubilant Heel that life was indeed worth living. He wound and wound, reflecting that this reel, when projected on a screen, would "hit 'em where they lived!"

This exaltation, however, came to an abrupt end, for Major Brand, grabbing hard at the man, dragged him away, and bawled to know whether he were bereft of his five senses. For the four rafts, having reached to easy water, were now being driven to the sedges with all speed.

Never had peril been more imminent, and Heel, fully awaking to this, tumbled off his perch and followed hard across the pebbly mud. He and Tim O'Flannel had snatched up the impedimenta between them, but whether they could actually save it was quite another question. Carbines were still speaking, and bullets came whining at their ears.

Tactically they had been caught at the worst spot possible, for the bank rose at a sheer grade, being bare and slimy for a few yards and then towered over by immense cotton trees and a maze of scrub.

Hirida Khan and the two Brands, knee-deep

in the tangle, manfully faced about to open a covering fire, imposing a slight check which just enabled the others to crash panting alongside. Heel's first concern was to clap his precious camera into its zinc-lined, watertight case and to snap over the patent catches. This done, he unslung his repeater and put it madly to work.

The odds were tragical—something like forty to five; the one slender hope our friends possessed, if indeed they possessed any, lying in the fact that all five of them were finished marksmen. Their foremost assailants collapsed like corn before the scythe, but this caused only a momentary lagging. In the lull of recharging, the attack came clawing over, wallowing in the scrub and rushing to close.

Revolvers were whipped out, and even now, for the space of minutes, the well-equipped five were able to keep their hideous foes at bay. So much so, indeed, that when the Major ordered a retreat they actually began to give way in good order. Moreover, to their intense pleasure, they felt the growth thinning at their feet. A vigorous dash might save them.

Major Brand called for this, but Tim O'Flannel, as ill-luck would have it, went down to the slash of a knife the very moment he swerved

to run. He was up again in a trice and staggering on, but the accident had foiled them.

Circling nimbly, the fanatic horde came leaping to make a finish. They came together, and with such savage zest that the three who tackled Dick bore him clean through the leafage. Skidding down the bank, they smashed on to the shingle—and Dick was underneath! It is hard to tell what happened exactly, but his skull seemed to jar on something. No more than a pebble, perhaps, but it sufficed; he was completely robbed of his senses.

Jog, jog, jog, jog! Such was Dick Brand's first sensation when some quiver of feeling began to restore him to life. He was being carried on a rude doolie at the tail of a draggled procession. Beside him trudged the grimy, ragged, gore-stained figure of Ellis V. Heel, a very saddened relic of the cock-a-hoop artist of an hour or so before. What with dirt and dejection the man was scarcely to be recognized.

"Hullo!" observed Dick.

"Same to you, sonny, and glad you're better. Ugh!"

"Where are the others?"

"They're all in this gay funeral somewhere!"

"So we're made prisoners. Why?"

“ Dunno—and care less. I don’t care a fig-pip what happens now. The camera’s done in ! ”

“ Did they smash it ? ”

“ No, I don’t think they dared. Guess they thought it was ‘ devil-magic,’ or some old stunt like that. They just picked it up and slung it into the river. I’d rather they’d done that to me—I would, sure. But it’s no use talking ; we’re busted. Hullo ! hullo ! ”

“ Where are we ? ”

“ At our journey’s end, by the look of it—and here’s the populace, but no banner to bid us ‘ Welcome,’ and no garlands. My crackey ! What a vile-looking brood ! ”

Hoisting up, Dick peered around, to find himself surrounded by an odd mixture of dwellings. From mat shanties and thatched bamboo the scheme of structure progressed to houses of heavy pile and temple-like buildings with carved and painted tops. Some of these latter, indeed, possessed triple roofs, set one above the other, impressing a spectator at once with the fact that he stood in the land of the Lamas.

Most commanding to the eye, however, and uprising to eighty feet, was a broad-based, slenderly finished tower. Hung at the top of this was a conical bell of figured brass, from

which a gilded rope was suspended. Any doubt that lingered in Major Brand's mind as to the existence of Swergas must be effectually settled now. Not only had he met these gentry, to his dire cost, but here, before his very eyes, was the mystic bell they were alleged to worship.

Villainous indeed was this tribe to look upon—squat-nosed, oval-eyed, with lips set in thin, callous lines. They thronged about, with a tall, muscular figure at the forefront, whom the luckless five rightly judged to be Boh Gogra himself. Boh Gogra was their acknowledged raid leader, but his, apparently, was not the supreme voice. Jye, the priest of the bell, was the man who controlled destinies, and Jye it was who singled Hirda Khan from the captives in order to have words with him.

The dialect spoken was that of the Kachinese—a tongue that Major Brand could manage like a native. But he did not announce this fact; he merely left the priestly Jye to worm what he could out of Hirda Khan. The result was somewhat unexpected, for, after a long confab and a lot of furtive glances, the five were marched off to one of the pile houses, served plentifully with food, and then left alone.

Hirda Khan chuckled, rubbing his sun-

baked hands. "We shall not die to-day," he whispered. "Whatever happens to-morrow we shall not be slaughtered to-day!"

"Why? What did you tell them?"

"I said that Sahib Brand was a wealthy *thakhin*—an illustrious gentleman. I said, 'He brought with him two bags full of gold, but, for fear of robbers, he lingered behind this morning and hid these somewhere on the khud-side.' Ah, but did you see how Jye's eyes glittered? There is one thing these ruffians love even better than torture, and that is the touch of money! They will tempt you with liberty—anything—if only you will lure them with gold."

"But this is the veriest bunkum! I've not hidden a single rupee."

"No matter, Sahib. Don't you see; the more you deny this story, after what I have told them, the more will they believe that you are merely obstinate. They will try to tire you. Jye will come to you, perhaps day after day, arguing, scheming, planning. And what will be the result? Why, we shall gain time! Just see what the morning brings."

But the morning brought nothing, nor yet the many mornings after. Hirda Khan, however, had predicted rightly, for the avaricious Jye came again and again, bringing all sorts

of outlandish proposals with regard to the Major's wealth. On the ninth day his patience at last gave out, and then came sensation.

It was about noon. Well aware that their doom would soon be pronounced, the five were squatting in semi-darkness, when the door was suddenly unbarred and a frightful effigy entered—at least, it was calculated to be frightful. The apparition was draped in a flowing cloak of orange silk, topped by a demon mask of surpassing ugliness. Four points radiated from the upper scalp, from the tips of which hung suspended little tinkling bells—exact replicas of the Swerga bell on the tower.

Dick, Heel, O'Flannel, and Hirda Khan were beckoned to come forth, and as they passed the guards of the outer chamber they heard the inner door closed behind. The Major had been left.

The glare of the sun seemed blinding, and it was a stumbling march that the quartette made to reach the middle compound in front of the sky-high tower. Here was rigged a bamboo frame with a cross-rail, while on the ground were four piles of faggots. Another heap of faggots, somewhat nearer the tower, was already ablaze.

The four unfortunates were stood in line, wrist-cords were cut, and their arms drawn

aloft till each man's thumbs could be coupled together and tied to the cross-rail. This done the priestly Jye—for the mask-man, of course, was no other than he—faced towards the tower and, in dirge-like tones, began to invoke the bell. Now and then he would bow forward and pull the rope, the bell sometimes tolling and sometimes remaining dumb.

This, no doubt, was a trick ; for, seeing that the bell was supposed to answer Jye's questions, that crafty pontiff naturally managed to get the answer he desired.

“ And now, O people,” cried he, swaying towards his audience, “ I will go and make one last offer to the father of this band. Perhaps, when he knows that his kin are about to die, he will be more ready to give ear.”

Whereupon the mask-man stalked away, leaving the ill-starred four strung up in that blistering sun and already tormented by swarms of ravenous flies.

At last the mask-man reappeared, and not only did he move with dudgeon, but his tones had grown thick with wrath.

“ The *thakhin* is stubborn to the end ! ” announced he ; and then, spreading forth his hands to the tower, “ Speak, O Spirit of the Bell, and teach us thy will. Here are four pilgrims who know not the path. Shall they

die? If so, be silent. Shall they be freed? If so, give tongue."

He jerked the rope, and the bell clanged—once. So unexpected was this that a muffled gasp went round the throng, while the mask-man, to all seeming, liked this verdict of the bell no better than they. Again he tried.

"Shall they be freed? If so, give tongue." And again the bell pealed, with no uncertain note. Then the mask-man wheeled slowly round. "The bell has spoken," said he, "and the bell must be obeyed. Seek not to injure these strangers now, lest the demons of the forest destroy you! Cut them free, for the spirits must be appeased. I myself will lead them into the woods and show them liberty. But stay you here, every man, for when I return we will surely deal with the one who yet remains."

Bewildered at this development, the discharged four could only blink at their galled thumbs and wonder if they dreamed. But there was the grotesque mummer waiting to escort them, and a few minutes later they had actually followed him from the arena of huts into the teak grove beyond. Thence they were waved into the jungle, entering a deep path. Arrived there, their pilot tore off his disguise in an instant, revealing the keen-set features of—*Major Brand!*

“ Now, lads,” bit out he, “ our lives depend on our legs ! Sharp ! ”

He set them the dashing example, and, gulping their amaze as best they could, they plunged strongly in his wake. It happened, fortunately, that they had picked the best path for their purpose, and it delivered them to the river at that reedy cove where the rafts were moored. Getting aboard one, they ferried over, jumped off, and pelted across the shore.

“ We must go for the hills as hard as we can ! ” panted Major Brand. “ There lies our only chance ! ”

They burst on to the higher track, and headed tirelessly upward.

“ Mage,” exclaimed Heel, “ put me wise. However did you do it ? ”

“ By backing my luck ! I knew it was a pretty rash notion, but I knew also that luck might bring it off. And luck did. I compromised with Jye, and he unfettered my wrists, taking off the mask to do it. Then I gripped him by the gullet and put him over, stuffing some mat into his mouth so quickly that he never uttered a squeal. My puttees completed the trussing as soon as I had skinned him of his robe. The rest was thoroughly simple. The guards without were blissfully ignorant ;

I brushed serenely between them after shutting the inner door."

"Gee! You're the coolest card I know. If—hullo! hullo!"

"What's that?"

"Sounded like a far-off yell. Guess they've just found out. If so, they'll be starting something. But there's our canework bridge!"

Ten minutes later they had gained the hillside, and this, though woefully blown, they started to scale with a sort of nervous energy that was greater than bodily strength. They snatched what cover they could, though still pursuing the beaten tracks in order to leave no spoor.

By the time they encountered the snow-line they were drenched with sweat and a-quiver with fatigue. But there could be no thought of halting, for many signs had reached them of a scattered hunt that nosed upon their trail. Once over the crest, however, they embraced the aid of Nature, footing it only on the sheer descents and tobogganing the rest. Neck and spine were ever in danger, but any fate seemed more enticing than that of recapture—now!

At length they were upon the roads—such roads as exist on the borders of northern India. Still they pressed on, mentally easier now as to that menace behind, yet confronted by the

new fear of being overtaken by darkness before friendly haunts could be reached. This, indeed, actually happened, but Hirda Khan's instincts held good. An hour after sunset he brought them to the village where mules and ponies were waiting, as well as a battery of spare rifles.

"Good!" sighed Major Brand. "I sleep to-night with a gun at my side, and I guess I shall sleep well!"

Some weeks later, at that middle hour of the evening when amusement-seekers stir forth, four sun-tanned people picked their steps amid the traffic of Broadway—Major Brand, Ellis V. Heel, Dick, and Tim O'Flannel. They had arrived there scarcely an hour before.

It was a dismal return for all of them, especially Heel. The latter had been so loath to leave India empty-handed that, up to the last moment, he had talked of mailing for fresh apparatus and of "wading in again." But Major Brand was obdurate; as a dealer in trouble, and from the measure of his own hardihood, he could afford to measure defeat. Also, he was in the habit of having his own way, and Heel, in the end, had succumbed.

But lo! there was to be a startling sequel. Turning into that avenue where the Ainslie

lectures were given, they found the great hall in a glow of electrics, while a considerable queue was forming at the doors. And a poster that caught their gaze was headed as follows :—

RIVERS, FLOODS, AND WATERFALLS.

PROFESSOR AINSLIE'S FAMOUS LECTURE.

Illustrated by Kinematographs, to which has now been added that Sensation of Nature :

THE CLIMBING RIVER OF TIBET !

“ My crackey ! ” breathed Heel. “ Well, I guess that's done it ! Get me right inside, Mage—I don't want to swoon out here ! ”

Excitedly they shouldered through the throng, pushing up to a side-door porter, who greeted them as though they were risen from the dead. In a kind of daze, and with much hand-wringing on the part of Heel's confrères, they bore at last into the lecturer's private room. More sensation—more hand-wringing ! Professor Ainslie's eloquence, like one of his own big rivers, began by bursting its banks.

“ Of course, we had given you up—quite ! ” averred he, becoming lucid by degrees. “ We were utterly in the dark about it all, though we did what we could to start inquiries. I had

wondered from the first whether this freak among rivers were an offshoot of the Brahmapootra, and it was on the surface of this, well down in Burmese waters, that the camera-case was found floating ! Being spied by a troop of sowars, it was fished out and taken back to camp, whence the commanding officer, seeing my name and address on the ivory tab, at once dispatched it to me ! ”

“ Extraordinary ! ” interjected the Major.

“ But the films ! ” cried Heel. “ The films ! ”

“ Absolutely unspoiled ! They were developed yesterday, and are simply fine. But, of course, you will presently see for yourself. Hurry round at once and fix up seats ! ”

They sat in a row, that adventurous company, wishing heartily that Hirda Khan were there to complete the full quintette. Vividly, faithfully, the whole chain of episode was recorded : the climbing river itself, the buoyant rafts, the yelling Swergas, and the blaze of rifles. The audience were thrilled only one degree less than the actors ; the spectacle ending, of course, with Major Brand’s rush at the foreground.

Dick Brand then sat back in his stall, which happened to be covered with softly-made velvet. “ My word ! ” muttered he. “ Well, I guess I’m glad to be here ! ”

QUEST SEVEN

THE PREY OF THE WEED

OUR three adventurers, after getting that unique film, were in no special hurry to leave New York. Tim O'Flannel, for his part, had many relatives in America, while Dick and his father developed an interest in aviation. Major Brand had always believed in the sea-plane as the right means for transatlantic flight, and he now backed his opinion by putting funds into the Beaton Hydro-Air Company. Both he and Dick, by the end of six weeks, were qualified pilots for the new Beaton machine.

Beyond this hobby, however, both father and son lived quietly for a month or two, deriving their only excitements from the daily papers. It was a peaceful period just then, save for disquieting rumours, along these shores, of a swashbuckler submarine.

These rumours became more grim by degrees, and were accepted presently as being authentic, yet still with variations as to detail.

The submarine itself was believed to be a stray unit of big days gone by, perhaps working from some base the secret of which had been maintained. Anyhow, defenceless ships were undoubtedly being "held up," and made to disgorge whatever of portable value happened to be aboard, while many had come into port maimed.

Of course, there was a great outcry. The New York papers made the most of it, inquiring if their navy was lost or dead asleep. Major Brand, as a man of robust action, was inclined to side with the Press—when abruptly the news came that the deed had been done. The pirate craft had been met and sunk.

Major Brand just then was stopping at the Madison Rex Hotel, and it was on this very morning that a call came for him over the telephone.

"Richard Ray speaking," buzzed the voice. "I've just been told about you by a friend at the Wanderers' Club. You are Major Brand, I understand; you tackle tough jobs in any part of the world?"

"I undertake Quests—just so."

"Well, here is *some* Quest, sir, and I do hope you will rally round, for I own I'm a bit disturbed. I am in business with my uncle, Raymond J. Ray. You know of him?"

“ The ivory king ? ”

“ Sure ; they make most of us ‘ kings ’ of some sort. Well, listen ; there was a big dump of ‘ teeth ’—the raw ivory—on the West African coast, and Uncle Ray set out for the Gulf of Guinea in person, taking passage on the first boat out—the *Liberty*. Many of us, when the Bermudas failed to report the vessel, became uneasy, and this morning comes some staggering news. The *Liberty*’s cast away—in the middle of Sargasso ! There she is, crippled, and she can’t get out ! ”

“ But—” Major Brand paused to think rapidly—“ I thought all those Sargasso tales were exploded. Do you seriously mean——”

“ Sir,” went on the voice, “ I can only go by the message lying before me, which says that the *Liberty* lies where no ship could navigate ; so her rescue shapes like a tough problem. Before ringing you up I consulted a couple of sea-sharps. And, sir, they riled me ! They still scoffed at the old notion ; swore a ship could be steered through any part of the Atlantic—then wound up their boasts by preaching caution. Wait, they advised, and turn it carefully over. But what, I ask, is to happen to those helpless castaways while the wiseacres here are trying to make up their minds ? Something *must* be done—at once ! ”

“ I heartily agree with you,” returned Major Brand. “ No reason, I suppose, to stop at expense ? ”

“ None, it’s a matter of life and death. Besides, uncle has his son with him—took the boy for company on the voyage—and I know he’d spend a fortune on this rescue, if only for Rollo’s sake. So if your wit will serve you to find some means——”

“ I will try. Come here and see me at once, bringing this message you speak of. Don’t delay ; I will be working out some plan.”

This said, the Major arose and began to pace his apartment, all the old vigour astir in body and brain. At the third halt he suddenly closed his fist and brought it smartly into the other palm. An idea had dawned—a very daring idea indeed. Could it be carried out ?

Now, while Major Brand settles that point, let us visit the wide Atlantic, and there—having turned back several pages of calendar—let us trace one of the strangest sea happenings ever remembered.

“ Say, Dad, have you ever seen weed like this before ? I’ve been fishing over the taff-rail with a bucket, and have managed to bale some up. It’s real tough stuff—as lingy as

leather—with fat sort of berries and strings of barnacles. See here ! ”

Raymond J. Ray got up from his chair on the quarter-deck and came to inspect the boy's exhibit.

“ Gee ! ” he exclaimed, “ that must be gulf-weed. According to what Captain Gunter said last night, we should now be skirting the Sargasso Sea.”

“ Sargasso ? Why, that's where the dead ships go ! They get twined up in great fields of this weed, and can never push out again.”

“ Ay, so the sailor-jacks will tell you, but of course they're only guffing. Take a bite out of what they hand you, my son, and throw the rest away ! ”

“ Well, the weed's real, anyway ; just see how it stretches over the ocean in long, trailing masses—and it seems to grow thicker ahead. I fancy it's clearer to starboard—let's just have a look.”

They moved to starboard, and, so far as a rising mist and the fast-gathering dusk would permit, they gazed out on a fair, weedless stretch of Atlantic. But something that sped sleekly astern caught Rollo's eye.

“ Look, look, Gov ! ” he whispered. “ What's that ? Why, it moves like——”

There was a puff of smoke, a rolling report,

and a shot from the back of nowhere went whizzing over the *Liberty's* poop.

"I was right," cried Rollo. "I can see her plainly now. Look—a submarine!"

"By heck, and so it is!" rapped out his father. "I suppose her crew are at practice. The lumpheads! Can't they see who we are? Captain Gunter, you'd best be slacking up a bit, till they drop to their mistake——"

At that instant a second shell shrieked over and hit the chart-house plumb, smashing that little structure to matchwood, and shooting splinters far and wide. One of those pierced Raymond Ray's cheek, stinging him to a sort of white fury. However, this was Captain Gunter's "lay-out," and the skipper had already rung his engines astern. In half a minute the submarine was churning alongside, her twelve-pounder still watchfully trained on the steamship. Then, from the mouth of her conning tower there emerged a nondescript figure, blunt and swarthy, no doubt of mixed birth.

"You woolly-witted hog!" roared Captain Gunter, "who do you think you're putting 'em down to? Think we're a practice target? Ain't your dead-lights good enough to see——"

"I haf seen quite vell," came the answer. "Ve search for rich vessels, and ve haf found von!"

This answer came as a distinct shock both to Gunter and Raymond Ray. The freebooter submarine!—that grim, elusive craft about which, at the time of their leaving port, rumour had still been vague. Gunter, however, betrayed no qualms.

“Oh, go home, you sap-headed guy!” he shouted boldly. “This is a raw deal you’ve put on us; and you’ll have to come across for it, too!”

“Vere are you bound for?”

“The Gulf of Guinea, if you must know, with a mixed cargo—and nothing of value.”

“But you haf money in the safe, yes?—or in the strong box, being der same thing. Now, vill you hand that over?”

“We’ll see you to Jericho first!”

The freebooter scowled evilly, thrusting out his bristly chin.

“Now, hark,” he snarled. “I vill gif you a dozen minutes to do as I say; then, if you still are pig-headed, ve vill blow your ship to der bottom. Now—be quick!”

“But—but—but——!” Captain Gunter was choking with rage. When at length his tongue was loosened, he poured forth his wrath in such terms that even this ocean outlaw was affected. His visage, anyhow, tinged dark with anger—at which tense moment, un-

luckily, one of his gunners drew notice to a ribbon of smoke that was advancing from windward.

"Vell, now," blared the rover, "ve find ve cannot wait after all. Und as for your insults, this is my answer!"

He gave the word, and next instant his twelve-pounder was belching shot after shot at close range. The three hits to the *Liberty's* hull were all aft, most of the rest being directed towards the bridge. The steersman dropped at his post, after which Captain Gunter—now wringing his hands like a man demented—leapt down the ladder and rushed to seek shelter forrard. The gun pursued him, and a shell exploded before the galley, the deadliest one of all in its destruction. Then the submarine began slowly to submerge.

Raymond J. Ray for the moment could only dumbly grip at the *Liberty's* maimed and twisted rail; then, as with a start, he awoke to life and briskly turned to the work of tending the wounded. By a merciful stroke of Providence no fatal hurt had occurred.

"How about that ship that skeered 'em?" demanded Captain Gunter, who had emerged with light injuries. "Is there any hope of her standing by?"

"None, I'm afraid, sir," answered Mr.

Laverick, the first mate. "She appeared to me to be heading due south; and in any case the mist has clogged out everything."

"How much are we crippled?"

"We're done right in! The rudder-head's gone, the wireless is out of order, and the steering gear fairly mangled. Besides that, we're leaking fast through two rents at the counter, and now settling by the stern."

"You mean we can't float much longer?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"Then have the boats victualled at once. Take Blight and Peto to help you. The rest will assist me in tucking the wounded aboard. Come, lads—look slick!"

Work progressed quickly. Both lifeboats were lowered without mishap, though a lee-ward listing made the second launch-out lengthy and rather difficult. Deep darkness had fallen before the port falls were cast loose.

"How's that?" shouted the skipper over-side. "Is it a sure get-away?"

"Yes, sir," answered the mate in charge. "I reckon we shall do all right when we come free of the weed."

"Weed?"

"Sure. We're fairly strung round with it, but we shall pull out in a brace of shakes."

Still, sir, I'd advise you to follow on without delay. Cheerio!"

The oars were heard to dip, splatter, and then to beat steadily clear. Only four people now remained on the *Liberty's* tilted decks—the two Rays, both of whom had insisted on giving way for the crew, the skipper himself, and Lew Bunt. The latter, though only a humble fireman, was one of the old, hard type. He "figured" it as treachery on the part of any sailor to desert a good vessel until she was half seas over.

"Now," said the captain briskly, "we've two smaller boats left to choose from, and we'll pick out the tightest. If you've anything special, Mr. Ray, that you wish to take—eh, what's that?"

Rollo had been the one to exclaim. "I've just thought of something," cried he. "Those pets of young Dawson's—a couple of Australian pigeons! He had them berthed with him in the fo'c'sle, and it's a cert he's left 'em behind. We must either dope them or take them along. Half a tick—I'll run and see."

The boy scampered off, to return a few minutes later with a large wicker cage swinging from his grasp. A scene of dismay awaited him. The others were grouped in a

pool of light, and some jerky words of the skipper's tailed off to a soulful whistle.

"What's the fuss?" demanded Rollo.

"There's no fuss, sir; none at all!" Captain Gunter laughed a little wildly. "We're up against it—both feet. See here!"

The speaker held his binnacle lamp to a boat he had just uncovered. Its straits were shattered by a great round hole.

"Golly!" exclaimed Rollo. "A shell hole!"

"Sure. This ain't a gig at all, it's a sieve—and the other one has fared even worse!"

"Is there nothing else we can do?" spoke Raymond Ray.

"If so, my nob don't rise to it. No, sir, we're helpless as a bag o' kittens. Still, I shan't sign my last deed till I've sounded those wells. Just carry on, sir; I'll be back in a bunch of ticks."

The report, when it came, was boisterously cheerful.

"I bring you joy, friends—great gobs of joy! Our after-bulkhead seems all set, which means that we've a watertight compartment astern. I guess we could weather it for days yet—maybe for weeks; so we'll wait for the dawn without qualm. What say you, Bunt?"

"Stick to yer ship, ses I," answered Bunt, "an' yer ship 'll stick to you."

“Cheerio! Well then, turn in, all of you, for this first watch will be mine. If there’s any change to worry about I’ll soon put you wise. Take that to your bunks and sleep on it.”

Weed, weed, weed! Such was the extraordinary sight that confronted our quartette when they came on deck at daybreak.

Led by in-sucking currents of the mid-Atlantic, the sorely crippled *Liberty* during the dark hours had drifted clean off her intended course. At mercy of a ten-knot breeze, and propelled by a steady stream moving up from the north equatorial, she had set a deliberate prow for the heart of the dread Sargasso!

The ocean’s blue bosom had vanished—blotted completely by vast tracks of gulfweed that stretched like a yellow meadow, with darkly mottled patches, to the edge of the far horizon. So thick was this film of growth that the very waves themselves were held in smothered check. A mere undulation disturbed that expanse, and in place of the clean ozone there uprose a pungent, slimy smell which the wind overhead could only partly dissipate.

Nothing relieved this weed-bound monotony save the drear relics of disaster. Here a ship’s

cutter, bottom-side up, and covered with damp, green mould. There an age-old brig, with some rotted ropes still hanging from her bowsprit, and with most of her ribs exposed. And everywhere the smaller wrack of dismantled masts, rusted funnels, mollusc-covered deck-houses, and odd remnants of deep-sea furniture.

Only immediately astern was there a rift in the weed at all, and this took the form of a watery pathway that stretched as far as the eye could travel. It was as though the *Liberty*, bent on deathly isolation, had cleaved herself a fairway through every obstacle she met. That passage, pointing as it did to freedom, held instinctive fascination for the castaways, and a first council of four was called upon the poop.

"This being thus," observed Captain Gunter, "it's up to us to look facts straight in the face. We've drifted into this weed, and we may drift out again; but think of the weary, waiting days that'll trickle slowly by, with nothing doing and nothing to sniff but leagues of pestiferous weed. Ugh! That won't be exactly pie, eh? Why, it gives me the icy spine!"

"Well, you've an alternative?"

"Yes, sir, and it's a raft. I've already spoken to Bunt about it, and he doesn't fall to the notion; but, of course, he'll shove with

the crowd. This raft is lashed to the fo'c'sle-head, so perhaps you've not observed same. We use it for cargo jobs in the tropics."

"But how could the raft be managed?"

"With four oars, used paddle-wise. Dead slow, of course, but sure."

"Then let's do it. Come, Bunt, screw off that scowl. What are you grumbling about?"

"It's dangerous, sir—dangerous!" muttered Bunt. "There's deep-sea critters lurking in that weed wot breed to appalling size. Still, don't you figger that I'm skeered, fer all that. If you finds me shirking any, jest hup an' mention it."

Bunt certainly worked like a Trojan, and it was largely due to his herculean efforts that the ungainly cargo-raft—weighing several hundredweight—was at length hoisted out astern and plumped into free water.

Access was soon established by means of a hempen ladder, stores being carried down and lashed to the middle timbers. While Rollo and Captain Gunter, thus employed, were standing on the raft, young Ray's notice was suddenly attracted by a thrashing noise out in the weed. He called the skipper's attention, and as they both looked they saw a claw-like, scaly limb, perhaps four feet long, waver in the air for one second and then squashily disappear.

"Whatever was it?" breathed Rollo.

"Search me," was the captain's simple answer. "I haven't a guess to offer—but I accept it as a lesson. Bunt was right—there *are* things in the weed. Here, lad, freeze on to this knife. I'm off to fetch a gun and some axes."

Captain Gunter was gone barely five minutes, and he met the other two on his return. Handing them a hatchet each, he was just explaining the reason, when, jangling the nerves of the strongest, a shriek of mortal terror rang out astern.

Dropping everything save their weapons, they raced for the break of the poop, seeing now great sinuous feelers that writhed and whipped in the air. Stumbling to the taff-rail, they beheld the terrified Rollo laid flat on the heaving raft. He clung thereto with his left arm, while with the blade-hand he stabbed again and again at a cuttle of gigantic bulk.

Raymond Ray flung over a leg to descend; but even as he did so one of those bloated tentacles clipped the ladder round and wrenched it off as though it were no more than cotton. One sucker already twined Rollo's calves, but now two others licked about his waist and dragged him from his hold.

It was a horrible, a nightmare moment for

the others as well as for Rollo. Raymond Ray, straining over, made a futile swing with his axe ; and then, while Rollo was being carried under to a death of torture, Captain Gunter began to fire.

Such an act needed grit and judgment. As the first bullet struck that pulpy carcass, the enraged brute began to lash its tentacles madly, with Rollo's limp form still tightly held.

Yet the skipper, picking his quick chances, fired and fired again. It was at its fourth peppering that the infuriated monster, having hurled its prey into the far weed, turned upon the gunman with savage ferocity. Two diabolical little eyes, set deep in pursy sockets, glowered as it came. The captain emptied his weapon into those glittering orbs, stinging the thing to even wilder abandon. Knotting on to the taffrail, the cuttle heaved itself clean out of the brine !

The two minutes that followed were frightful to a degree. Captain Gunter flung aside his rifle, and the three men, all wielding axes now, chopped and chopped again. Now one and now the other fell foul of those loathsome toils, being nearly dragged overside before a second axe whizzed in to the rescue.

Victory was sudden when it came. The cuttle, in fact, warring almost to a point of
 (2,411) 12

exhaustion, slid abruptly off and flopped soggily on to the raft. That thud appeared to arouse in it a last appalling energy, for it began to lash and churn the sea with all its dying might. The raft-balks sundered apart, and then, amid a whirl of weed and spume, the horror disappeared. Nothing remained save a widening blotch of red and inky fluid.

Raymond Ray, clinging to the moist rail, dazed with nervous effort, braced himself to the thought of Rollo and twitched around. His terrified mind was at once mercifully relieved, for the handy Bunt had made it his earliest business to fling the youngster a line. Rollo, a sorry, sodden spectacle, his face the tint of porridge, came tottering over. Then all four sank down on the readiest perch, and panted to recover.

"Well," muttered the skipper at last, "this vamoose is off, anyway. Here we are, and here we've got to stick. Contradict me if I'm wrong."

"I'm afraid you're right," allowed Raymond Ray. "We'll have to put a skid-pan on impatience. This gulf-weed, according to what I've read, exists only in patches. To-morrow, perhaps, or the next day, we shall ramble through to clear water. Meantime, we'll not be idle; we'll brisk round and build a bigger raft."

This plan was welcomed by all and busily adopted, though the ensuing hours, in point of outlook, served little to reassure them. The *Liberty*, with dumb and lifeless gait, maintained a forward motion, but the spreading desert of weed showed no sign of thinning to an end.

Next day revealed no change, nor yet the next. Indeed, they were all compelled to admit that the prolific tangle of *Sargassum* seemed even closer and thicker. Its bulbous clumps frilled high above the surface now, large tracks of it being dry and blistered beneath a blaze of sun. The narrow channel astern had long since closed in, and the *Liberty*, bound up by sinister tendrils, made a scarcely perceptible crawl.

Another feature, and one even more disquieting, was the increasing number of wrecks that hove up on all sides. Some of these, though dismantled above, were comparatively sound as to hull and afloat on an even keel. For the most part, however, they were only the frames of ships, so decrepit and waterlogged that the *Liberty*, even at her sluggish pace, soon overtook and passed them.

"It's an ocean graveyard," murmured Raymond Ray, overawed by so weird a spectacle. "This leaves me beaten. There was a research party sent to these regions, some years back,

that reckoned to settle-up Sargasso myths for good and all. When next they landed home they scoffed at the whole lot—they simply blew those sailor tales to bits. You remember ? ”

“ Sure,” answered Gunter dryly. “ I doffed my hat to them science-sharps, for I thought they’d got the goods ; but I guess they’re a back-number now. Here the ghost ships are, as plain as the portrait on my cover ! ”

“ And we’re one of them,” added Rollo, his tones peculiarly hushed ; “ or, anyhow, we shall be soon. Look ! ”

They were standing in the bows, and now, directed by Rollo’s finger, they turned their gaze ahead. Exactly in their path, and scarce a cable’s length distant, there uprose the phantom remnants of a 100-ton barque. There was an abrasion in her waist, while spars and rigging and gear were tumbled everywhere. Her cabin, her shattered deck-houses, and her stumps of masts were coated over with the slime of ages.

“ I guess we’re going to collide,” said Rollo.

“ Well, hardly that,” amended the skipper, “ for we haven’t enough way on us. Still, we may rub up to the old rattle-trap some time before nightfall.”

Nearly six hours later this actually happened.

The *Liberty's* stem, obeying the laws of attraction, lurched in to the hoary hulk at a point just abaft her fore-channels. The impact was only slight, yet the barque was so full of dry-rot that a wide stretch of her bulwarks crumpled in like egg-shell. The steamship, however, was now obstructed, and, after veering somewhat, she hove to a dead standstill.

"Brought to bay," said the skipper shortly. "This is where we take the count."

"Not a bit of it," said Rollo quietly. "This, I guess, is where we let off those pigeons."

"Pigeons !"

"Why yes, the pigeons that Hike Dawson left behind. They're not carriers, of course, but they're strong fliers, and they've got the homing instinct. Anyhow, now that we've come to a full stop, and can take our permanent bearings, I guess it's a trick worth trying."

"Lad," said the skipper solemnly, "you've cut your elders out and pulled the medal. You have, sure. I've been working my thought-tank for days, but never did I drop to them pigeons. Why, it's an all-fired notion !"

"A real winner," agreed Raymond Ray. "Even Bunt will have to admit it."

"Well," mumbled Bunt, clearing his throat for speech, "I don't say naught against it. Them birds may dooly land somewhere, an'

our message may be read. But this I ask you plainly — wot sort of rescue vessel can ever steer a set course through all this jungle o' weed? How's it to be done?"

The skipper scratched his chin. "As to that," mumbled he, "I'll own I'm dead at fault, but some highbrow on the coast may solve it. Anyway, let's give him the op. I'll brisk off now and work out our position."

A brief message was soon composed, giving the names of the four castaways and describing their plight. This, being copied on two scraps of canvas, was rolled tightly up and separately inserted in bits of fine rubber tubing. The birds were then fed and the missives firmly attached. After that they were carried up and launched off.

It was a tense moment, for the luckless four were pinning more hope to this plan than either of them admitted.

A little dazed at first, the two pigeons began to circle overhead. One came to a temporary rest on the *Liberty's* rusted funnel, then, after a preening moment, it spread its wings again and went sailing off in a northerly direction, bearing nor'-west.

The second bird, however, still hovered out and back, gliding low and at length alighting on a slimy spar that peaked in the weed some

few fathoms abeam. Then, even before it had time to steady itself, the swift, sharp-clawed limb of some unknown thing shot up from the weed and grabbed. There was a shriek of pain, a beating of feathers—and the bird had been whisked from view.

“Gosh!” muttered Bunt; and that, for the moment, was all that any one said. As a matter of fact, the daunting, motionless quiet of this world of weed, with its straggled fleet of decaying wrecks, was beginning to fret them all. And even the general air of profound deadness was only an illusion. Strange forms of life were lurking all around them, as was proved again and again. Several squids were sighted, while a crust of mouldy cheese, flung out on the growth, would vanish like lightning!

So day succeeded day, until, with night again approaching, young Rollo was seen to rise with keen attention.

“Hark! What’s that?” whispered he.

“What’s what?”

“A buzzing noise—there, don’t you hear it?” The boy held up his finger. “Why, it almost sounds like——”

Rollo got no further, for the whole party were on their feet by now and rushing for the open deck. Then four hearts made a glorious

bound, and from four throats there uprose a wild, delirious cheer. Against the sky, and droning powerfully towards them, were a couple of gigantic aircraft.

“They’re coming to us! They’re coming!” pealed Rollo, dragging off his jacket and waving with all his might. “Hooray! Our faithful pigeon has done the trick! Do you see what those craft are, Gov? They’re seaplanes—the new Beaton Seaplanes, designed for carrying big parties. And I’ll lay a dollar that Cousin Rick is one of those aboard. . . . There, see, at the saloon window—he’s waving! Hooray, Rick! Hooray! Hooray!”

The two ‘planes, with steady care, manœuvred to descend. It was clear that both pilots were much alive to the special and extraordinary difficulties of coming to rest on those fields of *Sargassum*. And the watchers, knowing from terrible experience the hazards of that weed, waited with pangs of anxiety that mingled oddly with thrills of relief.

The first craft, with Major Brand at the wheel, planed smoothly from the east and squelched to the weed some fathoms abeam, with her consort, steered by Dick, alighting a few minutes later not far beyond.

“Can you bridge the gulf between us?” shouted Major Brand, amid general greetings.

"We'll have a good try," returned Gunter, and soon decided as to how this should be attempted. The *Liberty* had been carrying a certain amount of prepared timber, and the skipper hoped, by means of this, to span across the treacherous space.

It was a strained process, for only two were able to labour below, while the others stood by with hatchets and rifles ; but at length the job was partially done—that is, the toil-worn quartette had gained Major Brand's machine, being able to grip hands with him, and also with Tim O'Flannel, who had been brought as a working passenger.

All this, however, had taken time, and the two machines had seriously "settled down" in the beds of weed. Major Brand, by luck, had alighted on a moderately thin patch, but Dick was in deeps of trouble. Richard Ray, from the saloon behind, began to feel dismayed. He strongly advised Dick to start his engine and attempt to "taxi" out. Dick accordingly tried, but the aircraft now was so deep in the oozy weed that even her propellers were becoming impeded.

"Steady!" cried Major Brand, whose instinct was already telling him something about the horror of this growth. "Wait till we come and try to clear you! . . . Skipper, have you

more material? Can you carry your timber causeway along to them?"

"Ay, I think so. But the light's beginning to fail."

It was, and to pursue their task a lantern eventually had to be brought; for with the dusk came sinister signs in the weed. Black, flickering feelers twice licked up around the timber pathway. At length, bathed in sweat, they knew it was no use; they must needs wait and hope for fresh daylight. All, indeed, felt thankful to climb safely aboard the ship.

That night, from the start, was full of disquietude. Vigil was kept upon the bridge, with axe and rifle handy, and those who retired were aroused within an hour by a ringing report. Bunt was on duty, and they found him leaning over at the break of the fo'c'sle, in his hand the weapon he had fired.

"Sorry, gents," growled he, his blunt composure evidently shaken. "I guess I saw double, arter all. I could ha' sworn to you, but three minnits since, that some nightmare critter, say ten yards long, was wrigglin' towards me up the fore-deck! But I reckon it was only a nerve-wave. Anyway, there's nothing on now, so you'd best slip back to yer bunks."

This rather startling episode set the others thinking, for they knew well enough that

Bunt was not the sort of character to imagine perils that didn't exist. A deck cabin abaft the bridge was therefore adapted at once as a berth for all to sleep in, so that full man-power could be marshalled at a minute's notice. Indeed, Major Brand advised that a double watch should be kept, but Gunter didn't think this called for, and the Major thought it wise not to counter his authority.

Captain Gunter, as it happened, was the one to relieve Bunt, and he was kept in a constant state of fidgets. There were rubbing, sucking noises against the *Liberty's* iron sides, and then again that *pat, pat, pat* on the fore-deck. Twice the skipper made swooping runs, to finally post himself at the head of the companion.

At last he was rewarded, for he distinctly saw a colossal blotch of black go past at a running amble. Springing out with his lantern, he hurled the axe he carried. There was a sound like the crack of a dish, and the huge body rolled over with a savage waggling of claws. Then the lantern-light flooded over it.

"Sakes!" muttered the captain. "If compelled to give it a name, I s'pose I'd call it a crab—but what an outrageous monster! This is where I'm staggered!"

The creature must have measured over three

feet across the rounded part of its back, and it was fitted with a brace of queer-looking spines that projected on either side. Its hindmost feet were webbed out for swimming, being fringed with stiff bristles.

“ ‘Pears almost like a lupa crab,’ grunted the skipper, “ but a knock-out for size ! Wonder where he was tracking for. This——”

Captain Gunter turned sharply towards an adjacent skylight which, having been shattered by a pirate gunshot, was now partly covered with tarpaulin. This light came over the engineers’ mess, which, in case of any new leakage astern, had been converted into a food storage. The skipper, sinking his lantern down through the breach, took a glimpsed survey of the mess-room below. What he perceived brought him to his legs with a lusty bellow, and within a minute the others, hatchets in hand, were rushing to his side.

“ For the love of Mike, come on ! ” roared Gunter. “ See that brute—I’ve just sogged it. But that’s only one ; they’re down in that storage by the score ! Snap up those glims an’ follow me ! We got to put it all over ’em, an’ I guess it’s going to look nasty ! . . . Why, see—the door’s come open ! ”

Led by the valiant Gunter, our friends pressed down the ladder, at the bottom of

which two huge crustaceans, identical with the one that lay slain on the deck, were just mounting with slabs of salt meat fast gripped in their vice-like appendages! Dick Brand, bounding clean over them, wheeled round and accounted for one, while a blow from Tim O'Flannel's axe gave quietus to the other.

This, however, was the merest skirmish, for, in his estimate of numbers, the skipper had in no sense exaggerated. The mammoths of the weed-world were here in their hordes, some of a smaller growth, some even larger, but all zestfully employed on satisfying their voracious appetites!

"At 'em!" shouted Major Brand, and eight weapons of sorts rang to the conflict. There was a mad, hasty scattering, some of the foe making a sidelong bolt for the ladder and escaping forthwith. Others backed to the broached cases, throwing up their defensive pincers and making sharp, outward snaps as the hatchets whizzed toward them.

One by one these were slaughtered, or else put to flight, but a formidable remainder made scuttering retreat into the dark crannies beyond. These, when the searching lights advanced, were found crowded back to the inner bulk-head. Affrighted utterly by the smash of assault, they were yet frightened to desperation,

and, as by common instinct, they pounced forth in united attack.

Whang, whang, went the clubs and axe-heads, but so thick was the carapace that armoured these giants that the best-delivered stroke failed often to cut through. Meanwhile, their incisors were beginning to inflict wounds, both Dick and Bunt being severely bitten. At length the hard-pressed fighters were compelled to fall back.

"Mount up here!" shouted the Major, and every one took the advice. Clambering on to the barrels and cases they crouched at bay. This was a fortuitous move. Most of the brutes made scamper to escape, only the angriest of them darting near in a quest for more battle. These, met individually in white-hot combat, were all dispatched at last, or else left *hors de combat* through being shorn of their deadly claws.

"Whew!" panted Raymond Ray, mopping his drenched brow. "Well, we seem to have pulled the honours, so now we'd better clean up."

There was no more sleep to be thought of, and, betimes next morning, the jaded castaways set about moving the residue of their stores to the saloon. They were astounded, notwithstanding what they had seen of those marine

weed monsters, to find how much their precious stock was depleted. Enough food having been kept aside for immediate use, it so happened that no one had entered the mess-room for three days. It was therefore possible that the crabs had been stealthily at work for three nights in succession, devouring large quantities and carrying yet more away. Cases had been prised open and the staves of barrels wrenched out. The food left fit for consumption was reduced to about one-eighth !

"This is plumb bad," was the skipper's mournful comment. "Moreover, it's going to be war now—war all the time ! Those demons 'll come again and yet again ! We've seen their trick of lumping together an' letting fly in a mob. That's what we've got to fear. Sooner or later they'll come in their hundreds, and heaven ha' mercy on us then ! There must be no more venturing above decks after dusk."

The skipper, by these words, showed himself to be far from hopeful as regards a speedy departure. Unluckily he was right, for the seaplanes were found so clogged with weed that the Herculean efforts of all that day did little to free them.

Major Brand, however, robustly refused to be down-hearted. That night they "held the

fort " in the saloon, while overhead, till break of day, the slurring thud and patter of besieging forces went on without cessation. To this was added the moan of a strong wind. A rasping raid on the skylight drew off at dawn.

" See here," said the skipper at breakfast, " I don't relish this lying-down game at all. We'll be forced to fight again some time, an' I'd rather meet my fate by the light o' day. Now, it's my belief that these crooked monstrosities breed most in that barque alongside of us. Anyhow, that's how they wriggle aboard. So how about a raid on that hulk, with some final attempt to hack ourselves clear? Of course it'll mean an all-fired risk; but we've got to perish some time, so— Hark! what's that? Dick seems excited!"

For Dick was heard shouting from the deck, and all crowded out to discover the cause. Gleefully Dick pointed, whereupon there was a roaring cheer.

For that strong wind of the night had achieved what their most manful efforts had failed in—it had broken out channels in the weed. The foremost seaplane was afloat on a clear surface of water, though a drag on the hawser showed that her floats were still clogged up underneath.

" It's no use; a broadside pull will never do it," declared Major Brand. " A strong tug

ahead might bring her out, but we've nothing to stand on. That timber is half a wreck."

"Shure, yet it might bear one, sor," declared Tim O'Flannel. "O'im tryin', any road."

So saying, and before his master could protest, Tim hung overside and dropped gingerly upon what was left of the frail planking. Cautiously he crept out along it, till, ankle-deep in weed and water, he was able to grip the hawser in a forward pull.

The others watched with bated breath, rifles at the ready lest anything hostile should suddenly arise from the weed. O'Flannel braced his huge shoulders, steadied his balance, and applied the strain. The seaplane shifted, with sullen, sucking snaps the weed gave; to Tim's gigantic strength—and he had to exert it all—the aircraft moved to free water.

"Hooray!" There was a wild cheer, breaking the pent silence, and yet another when Tim got safely back aboard. Soon the freed 'plane was drawn alongside, with her second cable—for she was linked to the other—coming full taut.

Major Brand, boarding his 'plane, overhauled her engines and got them going. Those powerful Beaton motors did the rest, Dick's machine being hauled out to fair water with comparative ease, and brought abreast of the ship.

Embarkation was contrived by means of a derrick rigged on the previous day ; and at last—at long last—the eight people were safely ensconced, with the two aircraft ready for flight.

“Cheerio, then !” beamed Raymond J. Ray. “This Sargasso’s a daisy place for squids and crabs, but I haven’t a crush on it myself. *Can* we really soar off ? ”

“I hope so,” murmured Major Brand, as he put his hand to the levers. “You’ll see. This is where the Beaton craft shines. It won’t be easy—but we’ll do it.”

The speaker was right. Both machines, after a jolting struggle, won finally clear, rising on majestic wing. And in a short half hour the dread world of Sargasso was being left far behind.

QUEST EIGHT

OLD GASPARD'S GOLD

"TWO ladies to see you, sir—a Madame and Mam'selle Patot. If you cannot receive them now they would like you to promise an interview before leaving New York."

"I'll see them at once," answered Major Brand. "Please show them up. . . . Say, Dick!"

"Yes, pater," from an adjoining room.

"Don't 'phone about that luggage. Come in first and hear what these callers have to say. Clear some of your packing off those chairs."

Dick did so, dumping same on the floor, then stood up to make his bow as the visitors arrived. One was a matronly lady of middle age, the other a girl of eighteen. Both were refined of appearance and tastefully gowned. Both were possessed of expressive looks and a Latin pallor of complexion.

"Please pardon us for not being quite ship-

shape," began the Major. "My son was just in the throes of packing up. Observe our stock-in-trade!" The speaker pointed to some rifles and a cartridge belt on the floor. "Pray sit down."

"Oh, thank you!" The elder woman, as they took the proffered chairs, cast a fluttered glance on these signs of departure. "I—I hope I am not too late!" exclaimed she. "Professor Ainslie advised me to see you; I think you procured something for him—some wonderful film? He told me you would undertake almost any sort of Quest, no matter how d-dangerous nor how hopeless."

"Well, yes," was the quiet answer, "that is so far true. You are in some trouble?"

"The trouble is about my boy, Marc Patot. I must tell you that we are French Canadians, well known in Ottawa; it was only after my marriage that I settled down in New York. That was some twenty years ago—about the time of the first gold rush to Klondike."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, I had an uncle, a Gaspard Patot, who joined that rush, and my next news of him—years after—was that he had died of exposure somewhere near Dawson, while trailing to register a claim. Still later a packet reached us. We were the only relatives he had left, so he made us his heirs. Is that clear?"

“ Quite.”

“ But, unluckily, Uncle Gaspard's will wasn't clear a bit. From the law point of view it wasn't a will at all, for he was an eccentric old fellow, and would never trust a secret to any second person. The contents of this packet must have been scrawled out when he was almost too ill to stir. He stated that while working all alone in an out-of-the-way gully he had struck it real rich . . . Those, Aimée, were the very words ? ”

“ Yes, mother,” replied the girl.

“ There had, he said, been only one seam, but he had dug enough gold from that to sink a canoe.”

“ That sounds good, anyway ! ” declared Major Brand.

“ Too good, I fear, to be true,” sighed Madame Patot. “ This alleged creek was too tiny to have a name ; so my uncle made what he called a sketch of the whole river above Dawson, with notes. But, mercy ! such a map as my uncle's you never saw. It looked like the picture of a branching tree, with numerous off-shoots, and his notes one could hardly decipher, for they had been made in pencil and afterwards—as I suppose—rubbed in the pocket. It was so hopeless ! ”

" Yet intended, I suppose, to indicate the whereabouts of gold ? "

" Quite so ; all the gold, in fact, my uncle had dug. He did not bank an ounce of it ; he was not that kind of man. Now, this puzzle of Uncle Gaspard's, with its promise of riches, proved very fascinating, especially to my boy, Marc. My means, then, were very slender, yet I had given Marc a good education. A headstrong boy, but clever, he was being coached for a business exam., and I'm sure he would have succeeded, but for this paper of Uncle Gaspard's. It allured him, distracted his mind, and—and——"

" He failed ? "

" Yes, he failed. We were all disappointed, while the boy was plunged into gloom. He reproached himself bitterly for what had been spent upon him, and all in vain. One morning, as an upshot, he disappeared—and with him Uncle Gaspard's document."

" You mean he——"

" Yes, he had set out for the great North-West—so like him, on the impulse. There was just a scribbled note. He would be a burden to us no longer, he said ; he would not write again until he had found Uncle Gaspard's hoard. It was so terrible, yet so like him—yes ! "

Madame Patot's emotion caused her to tremble ; her eyes were very bright.

" Listen, m'sieur," she continued. " My position has changed now, and also Aimée's. Through kinsfolk of my late husband's we have become—well, comfortably off. Yet, of what avail ? Our efforts to trace poor Marc by letter have all miserably failed. Some one must go to seek him—to bring him back. M'sieur, you could do it, yes ? There is no fee I would not pay. I would go myself, but—the country ! Could I——"

" No, madam," was the grim reply. " From what I have heard of the Yukon lands you couldn't ; you are far too frail—the cold, I believe, is merciless. But we are hardened—and we have often longed to visit the frost-bound North. So we accept your Quest. If it is humanly possible, we will find that boy."

" Oh, how can I thank you——"

" By helping us as much as possible. Did you bring a photograph ? "

" Of Marc ? How stupid of me !—no. But I have several. Could you not call to see them and take whatever you please ? Listen. You and your son might dine with us——"

" Very well ; that's agreed."

" When, m'sieur ? "

"This evening, madam, or never. Tomorrow we start for the land of snows."

"Ugh!—the bitter cold. Another ten minutes, and I'll be stiff to the bone." The speaker beat a cake of snow from his mitts and arms. "What a forsaken country! If ever we get out of this gorge alive——"

Dick Brand did not finish his rumination, for his father's voice, from the bowels of the earth, signalled just then for a bucket of hard-won rubble to be raised.

The whole proceeding was somewhat of a grim character. The Quest for Marc Patot had lasted now upwards of five weeks since leaving Dawson, where clues as to the missing youth had been picked up after days and days of inquiry. No one had known him by name, but a sour-dough ("old-timer") swore to a photograph, declaring the original of it to be working a lone claim on a higher reach of the Stewart River. This same informant—one Bud Hooker—further said that he "gotter notion as 'ow the young homo in question 'ad gotter search on or something, an' 'e was jest getting some pay-dirt up to 'elp 'im on 'is way."

This seemed so promising that the old-timer, not without heavy bribing, was induced at last to act as personal guide, and to lend his dog-team.

Of the rigours of that journey we need not speak ; suffice it that, after grim hardships, our party arrived at a forsaken spot which they had since christened " Starvation Creek." Forsaken it was, indeed ; for the shanty by the waterside, though showing signs of habitation, was found deserted. Some person, no doubt, had recently been living there, but—where was he now ? On approaching the so-called " gold claim," a twenty-foot shaft, a terrible solution presented itself. Here, again, signs of toil lay scattered round, already slurred over by snow, but the shaft itself had—fallen in ! Old Bud Hooker, shaking his head, feared the worst.

" I guess that's finished poor Marc Patot," muttered he. " Wot's left of 'im will be lying underneath."

Of course, there was only one thing to do, and that was to clear the shaft. Old Hooker and his dog-team had departed forthwith, but the others had stayed, and the stiff work of clearing out that frozen blockage had been going on for several days.

It was a degree easier now, for smouldering birchwood during the night hours had warmed the lower gravel sufficiently for Major Brand, toiling cramped-up in the semi-darkness, to delve out about a dozen bucketfuls. These

Dick, standing on a ramshackle platform at the top, slowly wound up by means of a creaky windlass.

"How are things going?" shouted he, as the emptied bucket was lowered with a rattle.

"Any easier?"

"Too easy!" shouted back his father. "That crevice you noticed yesterday has widened, and the grit underneath lies almost slack. Still, let's be thankful for Nature's grudging assistance. At this rate I shall manage to load as many buckets as——"

The speaker ceased with a jerk. Following the next ping of his tool there broke forth a series of bursting cracks. Dick, who had stepped to the edge of the chimney in order to peer down—felt the earth rock beneath his feet. Next instant he was dropping like a plummet, and only by flinging out his arms did he manage to clutch the edge of the platform, and so hang dizzily on.

For a second or so he was too scared to do more; but presently he heaved himself to firm ground, and turned to view that cataclysm beneath. Where the cleared-out hole had been before there was now a wide crater. It was basin-like in form, for the lower shaft, once more, had completely filled up. And his father was—buried alive!

Dick, could he have seen his own face at that moment, would have found it the colour of meal. He first cried, "Tim! Tim!"—and then, with tightly clenched jaw, he set himself to wrestle with the calamity.

Tim O'Flannel, just then, was down by the river, where a lot of logs had been lying, and, acting on Bud Hooker's advice, he was now lashing these together to form a useful raft. On hearing Dick's cry, Tim came stumbling up at once.

Half an hour's extraordinary labour cleared a sort of passage to the broken head of what had been the original shaft. Here there were several blocks of frozen dirt weighing perhaps half a hundredweight each. These Tim managed to clear at length by lashing on the pulley-rope, though the last one subsided, creating another rumble down the hole.

The latter was now more than half cleared, and those above could see the splintered head of their rough ladder. This, composed of rough birch poles, and being propped at a slant, had diverted some of the downfall. What was more, it had saved Major Brand's life. For, on scrambling down bit by bit, Dick perceived his father to be lying behind the ladder, free as to the upper part of his body, but with both legs pinned.

“ Father ! ” cried Dick wildly. “ Father ! ”

A groan was all he got for an answer, but he could see now that his father's eyes were open, and that he was well in the land of the living.

The long struggle of rescue was only begun as yet, and nightfall, with heavier snow and more piercing cold, was upon them before Major Brand was hauled from the shattered chimney and painfully assisted to their water-side cabin in the valley below.

Rushing to an adjacent sandpit, O'Flannel fetched an armful of brush, got this crackling, and then piled on log after log. The old Yukon stove fairly glowed. There was soon a bubbling pannikin of cocoa, and this the adventurers drank between them, Major Brand being forced to gulp the lion's share.

Next a scanty larder was raided, resulting in a mixed repast of beans, coffee, and some rather bony grayling that had been caught through the breaches in a frozen lake near by.

“ Well, pater,” demanded Dick presently, “ how's it feeling by now ? ”

“ I'm a bag of aches, Dick, nothing less ; but that was a wonderful escape ! ”

“ Sor, 'twere the most mortal shave that iver Oi hev known,” murmured O'Flannel. “ Niver did Oi expect to see ye spake again.”

"Well, never mind," smiled the Major. "I have, at least, got something for my pains."

"Besides bruises, sor?"

"Yes, besides bruises. I had just made a discovery down that hole, and the sight of it made me a shade too eager. I had just come to the bottom, and was sure of one thing—no body lay entombed there. What I saw there was a man's jacket, pinned down by a frozen mass of grit. The tail of the coat was caught; its wearer, I imagine, escaped by wriggling out of it. Fumbling in one of its pockets, I felt a flat object and wrenched it out. *That* caused the cataclysm."

"A small pocket-book, d'you mean? Why, yes, you were clutching that when we brought you up. Did it drop somewhere——"

"Yes, here; I've just picked it off the floor. Friends, we are on the scent! This book is Marc Patot's diary—see, here's the signature. It describes all he has done, and, better still, what he intends doing. The last entry—four days before we arrived here—says he had found enough 'pay-dirt' to keep him in food for several months. He was going to work the claim for another five days, and then move on to his next area of search, White Mane Bend. No doubt the collapse of that shaft hastened

his departure; but for that, we should have found him here."

"Shure, what lamentable luck!" exclaimed Tim.

"Yes, but it might have been worse. We know, at all events, exactly how to proceed. Marc Patot, if he sticks to his plan, will now be at White Mane Bend. We must get back there at once."

"No sleds, no dogs, and no trail—thirty miles; an awful job."

"Young sor, ye're forgettin' the raft," exclaimed Tim O'Flannel. "It's now all fit an' ready. 'Twas Bud Hooker himself who reckoned that'd be our aisiest way of gettin' back when so be the ice had cleared."

"Well," agreed the Major, "we'll try it, if only for the sake of speed. An unknown risk, of course, but not the first we've taken. If I'm fit enough we'll start to-morrow."

"Dick, cling to that bundle. Tim, fend her off. We shall be swamped in another second."

The pace was dizzy; that raft of pine-logs became less manageable every moment, and they were about to enter the White Mane Rapids.

Dick, panting, staggered back from the impact as his punting-pole met the rock, and he

regained his balance only just in time to tackle a further stony tooth over which the water hurled and boiled.

"It's—it's too much for us, pater!" he gasped. "Hadn't we better put to land?"

As he spoke a great roller like an ocean wave came seething over the frail craft, and Tim, still clinging to the bundle of their possessions, was drenched utterly to the skin. Major Brand snatched a breath to speak. "You are right, Dick!" panted he. "We must try to get ashore. To go on as we are means certain death. The pole's on this side. Try to work her in—*Now!*"

The ungainly bark swerved heavily about and drove for the river-margin—leaping greedily, as it seemed, towards snags and destruction. Dick and Tim, with teeth set hard, stood firmly on that side, their long poles ready to fend.

"Our kit, Dick!" cried Major Brand, without moving his glance. "Fling that to the shore the moment you are able!"

The raft grated a boulder and shivered round, while Dick made a lusty heave. It was not a long throw. Happily the bundle curved over the curl of mad water and fell safely among the rocks. But the fore part of the raft in the same moment smote in so smartly that some of its bindings snapped like whip-cord.

“Look out!” roared the Major. “Dick, your pole—sharp!”

But Dick, for the instant, had nothing at which his pine stave might hold, so he dug it swiftly down. It stuck fast, too fast, indeed, for the pull upon it was so hard and sudden that it split off short towards the top.

Rapid as thought, the raft fell full away, returning broadside to the mighty middle current. Like a chip of driftwood on a high sea comber, she was whipped up and hurled downstream, her living freight clinging helplessly on.

The situation was awful, and more awful it became with every passing moment. With the snapping of Dick's pole there had seemed to snap all hope of controlling the treacherous little transport. Indeed, to be free to save his own life, Tim had been compelled to let the second pole go at the time of their falling back.

The situation became a nightmare one—horrible. Lying prone on the rough-hewn logs, over-washed every moment by the frantic rapids, they were hurled along between the masses of frowning, snow-capped cliff which towered on either side.

By some amazing trick of fate the raft now avoided the occasional encroachments of rocks with singular deftness, dodging this way and

that, now above the water, now beneath it, spinning crazily along with the swing of the roaring flood.

The three unfortunates who hugged it had a glimpse of each other only at intervals, and speaking was out of the question. Icily sodden, they were kept breathless and half-choked by the malicious surgings which came again and again.

And then, on a sudden, occurred even greater chaos. The binding-ropes at one end of the raft were soon wholly gone, and so the logs, fanning apart, began to put a terrific strain upon the cords at the other extremity. It is astounding that these should have lasted as long as they did, but they sundered at last altogether, with the sudden thud of a far-away cannon. The barks, thus freed, drove this way and that, creating a new and appalling danger. The three poor voyagers, flung to the water, had now to fight with frenzy for their lives.

O'Flannel got clear of the muddle fairly soon, and he grabbed at an out-floating beam. The Major's foot was terribly squeezed between two bobbing lengths, and only by giving a huge wrench did he save himself from being pulled instantly under. Dick seemed less fortunate ; for a hundredweight log, heaving up from the fearful tangle, rolled and came down

full upon his forehead, stunning him completely. He went under with a short, piercing cry.

The Major, hearing that note behind him, peered wildly back, and saw his son's arms as they shot aloft before disappearing. Letting go his own supporting timber, the Major strove to oppose the current a little by a series of lusty breast-strokes. He might just as well have tried to swim a mill-race; but he was, at all events, able to avoid what remained of the wrecked raft, which shot tumbling down the rapids ahead of him.

The very speed of the flood saved Dick so far, for his inert body was allowed to sink only partially before being whirled again to the surface. His father saw the helpless, sagging form, and he put out all his remaining strength in the effort of getting at it. This achieved, the elder man ploughed strongly for the shore—or for where he vaguely supposed the shore to be.

Tim O'Flannel, who had gained a rocky promontory, saw them coming, and, his chest still heaving vastly with his recent exertions, he lay flat on the icy snags and prepared to lend his aid. Though still clutching doggedly at his son's bedraggled body, the Major was lost to all sense and order of things, and when

Tim's grip snapped upon his arm he could do little to assist the landing.

However, bracing himself, Tim hauled like a Briton ; and so, with jaw set hard, he slowly heaved the others to safety. For a while they could do no more than lie as they were—gasping for breath.

They did not lie long, for the frigidness of the passing winter soon cut their drenched bodies to the bone and called them to be alert. Dick, however, was still insensible—apparently lifeless. His state demanded from them every bit of energy they possessed. Desperately they worked over him.

Slowly, to the vigorous attentions of the two others, Dick crept back to warmth and life, and finally he was able to struggle up.

“ Our bundle ! ” gasped the Major then—“ the one you threw out to the rocks. We must scramble back at once and see if we can find it. Sharp's the word—the night is closing in fast.”

They made their way with great difficulty up along that rocky shore, and happily they chanced upon the pack of belongings. Wrapped tightly in oilskin, it was scarcely damp inside, and they were able at once to have a swift rub down and a change of under-garments.

The only things actually lost with the raft

were two rifles. However, they were left with one rifle, a revolver apiece, and plenty of ammunition, all in good condition for using, as well as three keen knives.

"But we must push on," cried Major Brand, "for the larder is very low." He tapped at the small tin of eatables which he had slung to his shoulder. "We must shoot something before nightfall—but first to discover some place of moderate shelter."

They swarmed up the ravine, where around them stretched a hilly expanse of forbidding whiteness. Fortune, so far, had used them hardly, but now came a rare surprise. They were toiling up a long, slanting cranny when Dick suddenly cried,—

"A hut! A hut!"

A hut it certainly was, old yet still sound, cunningly built in a deep cleft of hillside. Within was a damp litter of neglect—a trestle, a broken pick, a shovel, and a creaky pine-wood bench. On the back of the rude door was nailed a horseshoe, caked thick with rust.

"Whirroo!" voiced Tim O'Flannel. "Ah, can this be true, or am I dreaming?"

"No, it's real enough!" said the Major; "and it's going to fit us nicely. If our quarry is within ten miles of this we're going to get him!"

On the banks of the river, not a mile distant from our friends' well-found cabin, there trudged next morning a solitary figure in a tunic of lynx-fur. Marc Patot was his name—and his footsteps had wandered so much that he had only the faintest idea of his whereabouts. His small sled of belongings grew desperately heavy to pull—while his bundle of rations grew alarmingly light.

“Get away, you beast! Yah! Mush! Slip it!”

This, for the fortieth time, to a gaunt, slinking form that circled round the drag. The offender was a mongrel husky that had sniffed up a stealthy acquaintance some few hours before.

In a weak moment, though he could ill spare it, Marc had flung this prowling waif a shred of bacon, since which there had been no peace. The husky hung grimly on. The sight of its lean flanks awoke spasms of pity in Marc, but he was forced to harden his heart. He might, as a measure of pity, have shot the half-starved animal. Instead, he made excuses with himself.

“I’ve only one charge left in the rifle,” muttered he. “I must save that.”

So the plodding and the sniffing continued. Twice that husky made a savage pounce at the

sled. An exasperated kick was its portion at length, and it slunk snarling to the rear.

"Ugly brute," panted Marc, as again he faced up to the eternal clog of snow. "He's more wolf than dog, by the look of it—and I guess he'd be nasty at a pinch. If—h'm! *now* where are we?"

The slight trail he had been following since dawn slurred off suddenly into a couple of shallow drifts, one of which wound by the river, while the other held out to the north.

"S'pose I'd better take the higher one," mused Marc. "Guess I'm quit with fortune-hunting, anyhow, and the sooner I——"

He ceased with a jerk, some slight sound having caused him to turn. That husky was back! The dog had its teeth in Marc's bundle of food, and was just tugging it from the sled.

Bang!

Marc, pointing his rifle, had fired on the instant, but with such haste that the lead merely ploughed into a strapped sleeping-bag, quite two inches clear of the wolfish snout.

The husky, at that clanging report, whirled back on its haunches, its jaws bared in a grinning yelp, its every hair bristled to a point. Most awesome of all was the glitter in its bloodshot eyes. Marc, with swift, unnerving instinct, learnt at a glance how things were.

This famished creature, at the limit of its endurance, had suddenly gone crazed !

There was no chance to think. The young gold-seeker was too much in extremity to choose his action clearly. With some vague hope of scaling a tree, he slung the emptied gun at the mad brute's muzzle, and then raced up-slope.

There was a spruce clump on the ridge, and, nearer down, a solitary cotton tree. Marc gained this, but with the foaming husky hard behind. Whipping out his sheath-knife, he wheeled to the attack. There was a cloud of snow-dust and a smother of warm fur. The brute got him this time by the left shoulder, and its fangs went deeply in.

Marc stabbed and stabbed again. Dimly he was aware of shouting voices from the snow-spur above. The crazy dog, newly startled, fell grovelling away—and a crisp gunshot rang to the far gorge. It was Tim O'Flannel and Dick Brand, who had burst on the scene in the nick of time.

Mortally hit now, that husky fled to cover, never to be seen again. Marc Patot, sinking to the tree-roots, took one flitting glimpse of a fur-capped youth who stooped to examine his hurt. Then all things were blurred, and he knew no more.

Marc Patot opened his eyes to a welcome sense of warmth. He gazed about him.

"This a road-house?" he queried drowsily.

"Why, no, this is a drearsome cabin which we chanced on last night, and a very happy find it has proved to be. Anyhow, we came to find Marc Patot; and I guess we've done it—eh?"

Patot stared. "You—you came here to find me?" he muttered.

"Yes, to take you home; what's more, you've got to come. Your chase after phantom gold has lasted too long already."

Major Brand went on to explain, while young Marc appeared reconciled to the fact that he must now surrender.

"What a time of it I've had!" groaned he. "Week after week, month after month. Ugh! I couldn't live through it again. In creek and gully have I searched for that shanty, and I've searched for it in my dreams. The said shanty was what I had to ferret for—a cedar-wood hut, set in a wedge of rock, and with a horse-shoe nailed to the door——"

"What! A horse-shoe?"

"Yes! I suppose you don't know——"

"Know!" shouted Dick Brand. "Why, look at this—*look!*"

Marc Patot needed many minutes before he

could make out the rusted object at which they all so excitedly pointed. He then, forgetting his hurt, nearly sprang from the bunk.

"What!" he cried. "Why, there *is* a horse-shoe! Was that thing stuck there when you first located this cabin?"

"Shure it was!" Tim said; "an' 'twas me who declared it might yet bring us luck. Sakes! I wonder if it *has* brought luck?"

"Was there a pinewood bench here too?"

"Yes, yes! Why, you've got your elbows planted on it at this moment!"

"Then dig beneath it; oh, hustle round, and dig as you have never dug before!"

"Stay! The bench was shifted. When first we came it was set tight in that far corner. Rummage out that old pick, Tim—here's the shovel. We'll start this somehow! Here goes!"

The next ten minutes were ten of the most breathless our friends had ever lived. Hope sank along with the pick, as deeper and deeper they delved, to encounter nothing but Yukon sod and grit. Indeed, the old grim despair was again settling upon Patot, when, quite suddenly, a poke was struck. It was a big, knobbly poke, and it opened to reveal, not dust, but a heap of sparkling nuggets.

"Good powers! What a gorgeous sight to

behold ! ” gasped Patot. “ After all those ghastly months ! ”

And there was more ; that dingy little hut, in fact, was an Aladdin’s cave—nothing less. Our friends, when they knew for certain that they did not dream, were so overcome that they became a trifle light-headed. The reaction was so great, in fact, that Patot scarce knew what he did. He pranced round the gleaming pile.

“ Well, we ought to go shucks in this,” laughed he, “ and I guess that’s only fair. As for good old Uncle Gaspard, his map was a dud—but his gold is the real, sure thing ! ”

“ True,” agreed Major Brand, “ and there are other sure things as well. One is that we start back at once for New York, to the people who anxiously await you. In completing *your* Quest we also complete our own.”

QUEST NINE

HANG LOO THE PIRATE

EVAN GWYNN had lain in No. 5 hold of the s.s. *Colombo* for more than seven days, and, despite the fact that he was a brawlad of fifteen, he almost wished that he had never been born. He began to feel, in fact, that if he remained in this stench of darkness much longer he would become really ill, though not from sea-sickness so much as from general nausea.

Gwynn started to crawl. Like some burrowing rodent he groped a tedious passage between the stacks of dried, pungent fish. After some minutes he won to a higher level and to the pallid rays of a globe lamp that hung somewhere aloft. Then, with a thrill that stabbed him through, his hand suddenly closed over—a human leg!

Peering up, Gwynn saw in the owner of that leg a stalwart youth of about his own age, on his features a friendly smile. The youth spoke.

“Don’t be alarmed,” began he. “My name is Dick Brand—and why I am here I will explain presently. I suppose you are a free passenger?”

“Yes. My name’s Evan Gwynn—Welsh, of course. I tried to get a berth on this hooker before she left Hong-Kong, but the skipper—a red-whiskered despot called Elbow—said he’d no convenience for parlour boarders. Man, I could indeed have pushed his face in. But I wasn’t going to be done. I just waited my chance and nipped down here on the quiet. When I can I mean to slip ashore.”

“Where?”

“On some island for choice—anywhere between here and the Siamese Gulf. I want to explore a bit.”

Dick Brand looked surprised. “This,” declared he, “begins to get strange, for my father and I are here with that same desire. Many of those islands are only rocky wastes, and not a scrap attractive. What, I wonder, do *you* expect to find there?”

“Well, I *might* find Hang Loo.”

Gwynn, as he spoke, dragged from his pocket several badly printed bills. These were in various languages—English, Siamese, French—and they offered divers fat rewards in dollars, katis, and so forth for the capture of that

notorious sea-shark, Hang Loo. Hang Loo's whereabouts, for many years, had been a considerable mystery, but he was known to be still active and lurking not far from the scene of his old crimes.

"I've made a sort of vow," said Evan Gwynn earnestly. "There's nothing in the world I'd like better than to settle with Hang Loo."

"For the sake of the rewards?"

"No. Look you. My governor was a residency surgeon in British Malaya; he was one of those who perished on the *Canton Bella* when Hang Loo robbed and scuttled it. I was only a kid then, but I've never forgotten. Unknown to my relatives in England, I'm going to devote these last holidays to a regular rove round. Who knows, I *might* stumble on some clue. For the moment I'm my own boss. I've got a billet with the East Cinnamon Company at Bangkok, but that isn't till September. My plan was to get hold of a good sail-boat and——"

"Wait," interposed Dick Brand, "you must now listen to me. My father and I, with our man, Tim O'Flannel, are adventurers—we take up Quests in any part of the world. And our present Quest is for Hang Loo the pirate."

"It is!"

"Yes. We are instructed by the authorities

at Hong-Kong. Of course, they hardly expect us, while working alone, to rid the sea of Hang Loo; our Quest would be counted successful if we just found the rogue's lair. So we're just knocking about these waters, picking up facts here and there. It was hard to get on this ship. Tim O'Flannel had to take a job in the engine-room—for the vessel was said to be over-full already. You're in with the cook, aren't you—that half-caste johnnie called Sen?"

"Yes; on the sly he's been bringing me food."

"So I understood. You'd better throw in your lot with us if things go wrong. That's why I came down. If——"

Dick broke off with a low gasp, for abruptly to their ears there had come the sound of a muffled screech, a clatter on the deck above, and then the mad patter of bare feet darting hither and thither. Jabbering broke out in noisy concert—more screams, and then a strident voice of authority that bit loudly through the tumult.

Dick whistled softly. "That sounds bad for us," muttered he. "Those deck passengers, by the sound of it, were ripe to start a mutiny, but the fire-eating skipper has now taken them in hand. Ugh! they're a genial gang—an unspeakable mix-up of Chinks, Malays, and Luk

Chins. Every man of 'em, I'll wager, has got a kris or a dah hid snug in his sarong."

"Wonder what the fuss was?"

"Dunno. Perhaps, as paying guests, they rebelled at the baleful stodge served out to 'em from the boilers forrard in the name of food. . . . Hush! What was that?"

"Some one coming—Sen, I've no doubt. There's a hole in the bulkhead between this hold and the bunkers. Yes, here he is!"

A yellow, cadaverous visage loomed up in the murk, the owner of which betrayed signs of haste. He panted as he arrived, and was seen to be clutching two rifles.

"What!" exclaimed he, catching sight of Dick. "You down here, too—good! The skipper, I tell um 'bout stowaway, an' he say go fetch um quick. Only six white men in crew, an' the brown scum try to kill um all! You come quick—you fight like fury!"

"Why, what has happened?"

"Mutiny! Them brown debbels try to cut up everybody and grab um ship. Two junks are standing in to help, so it's all put-up job. Them 'passengers' allo bad. Mussy—hark!"

Fresh howls broke out aloft, and then, with a jamming jerk, the *Colombo's* engines ceased to throb, and she slowed to a standstill.

But Sen, before this had fully happened, was leading the two boys in a floundering scramble over a maze of freightage, holding up his battered lantern to a rusty abrasion in the transverse plates. Worming through, the trio found themselves glissading on a heap of coal, having escaped from which they dived into the stokehold. Here, beneath the steel ladder, a brace of stokers—Lascars both—were humped in abject terror, while from the engine-room above came a din of mortal combat—native curses, whines of agony, and a huge Irish voice that blazed defiance at the top of its tones. Then, pursued by the stab of a kris, a bulky body dropped clean through the manhole and thumped at our friends' feet.

It was that of Tim O'Flannel, terrific in anger. When his blazing eyes encountered Sen, and the loaded guns, he loosed forth a bellow of pure joy. Seizing one of the rifles he whanged at the blocked manhole, cleared it, and then went swinging aloft, shouting for the others to follow.

This they did with a will, the two rifles spitting such havoc among the evil concourse of ruffians that they soon went flying for shelter. Plucking quick courage, however, they at once came pouncing back to complete the work. With rifle clubbed in his greasy paws,

O'Flannel sprang among them and smote like a man demented, coughing epithets and carrying a bewitched life amid that glinting circle of blades.

Sen backed him up with a zest, but the two boys, being yet unarmed, were in a very hazardous predicament. Dick Brand, dodging a razor-edged dah, tripped his man and then rolled another beneath the fitter's bench with a stunning blow from the shoulder. Evan Gwynn, meanwhile, having espied the tool-rack, snatched forth a couple of gigantic spanners, thrusting one into Dick's hands. In that same moment the cook was seen to collapse.

Thereafter, for a bunch of straining seconds, the brunt of the whole affray seemed to rest on those two boys, and Dick feared—though he dared not risk one glance backward—that O'Flannel had also succumbed. Such, however, was not the case. Though slightly wounded, the gallant Tim had flung himself to a task with new energy. Having lugged a hose-pipe from the store, he now screwed it, with desperate swiftness, to the main feed-pump.

Not a whit too soon was this operation completed. Gwynn, struck by the flat of a dah, had all but fallen, and Dick was at the edge of his endurance, when a jet of boiling

water hissed upon the heads and chests of the enemy.

Screeches rent the air, which is not surprising, for a scorching spout of some two hundred degrees heat can hardly be met with stoicism. A burned, panic-stricken mob they fled, some two or three reeling into the crank-pit, the rest crawling up the ladder.

"Hip-hooray!" gulped the chief engineer, MacNagg, who, since the first assault, had been lying dazed. "Gosh! ye're a bonny fechter——"

MacNagg ceased, for, as suddenly as it came, so suddenly that deluge gurgled off; for one of the smitten Malays, recovered from his blows, had crawled behind and severed the canvas pipe with a single slash.

Whooping with savage glee, the teeming rabble swirled back in redoubled force, and even the doughty O'Flannel was compelled to see that the position was utterly lost. Gwynn, plunging into the gangway that led past the engineers' berths, called upon Dick to follow, while Tim and MacNagg strongly brought up the rear. At the starboard door of the saloon they bumped into Major Brand and Captain Elbow, who, with the steward and second mate, had been hurrying to their aid. They were dragged in with not a tick of time to spare, and the door was fast bolted.

"There was na help for it, sir!" panted Mr. MacNagg. "Puir young Hobhouse is kilt, an' also Sen, an' the gomerils would ha' skewered us up had we stayed but a thought longer! D'ye ken at all what they're after? Have ye anything guid i' the strong box?"

"Strong box!" echoed the skipper bitterly. "I make 'em full welcome to all the dollars they can light on there! No, it's my belief—yes, Mr. Buckle? How now?"

The second officer, a grimy kerchief twisted round his brow, came stumbling from the companion.

"They mean to rush us, sir," he whispered, "and they mean to do it right briskly! Those two junks, and a couple of rag-sailed fishing-boats, have warped up to our counter, and some forty more of the demons have tumbled aboard! But they've scarcely a shooting-stick between them, while we've half a dozen rifles and loads of charges. Think—if we could keep 'em at bay till dawn!"

"Well, we'll have a good try!"

"Where?"

"Here. We've no better place."

"There's one better pitch," declared Major Brand, "could we only reach it, and that's in the iron bunk-house."

"Losh, he's right, sir!" broke forth Mac-

Nagg. "That bunk-house 'd stand a siege. Don't let's be cutting words about it, sir; let's make the dash at once!"

There was a rending crash at the companion head, followed by a thump-thump of bare feet upon the stairs.

"To the bunk-house!" settled Captain Elbow. "We must try the after-ladder."

Sweeping up arms and ammunition, stuffing the latter into their pockets as they ran, the hard-pressed eight darted across and went climbing to the quarter-deck.

The two boys, Gwynn and Dick, forming the tail of this retreat, stumbled over each other in the unfamiliar gloom and were badly left in the rear. Above, they heard Major Brand's peal of warning, followed by scuffling blows and the crack of pieces. By swift divination they knew that their party had met grim opposition at the outlet, and that they were now beating a passage aft.

Gaining the gangway that gave to the deck cabins, the breathless pair were caught in a yelping surge of humanity. They sprawled their length beneath the trample of naked feet, and the crazy horde tore on. There was a metallic bang aft, announcing that the handful of whites had won to the bunk-house and barred themselves in. But the two boys were

completely cut off. Left behind as by a swirling tide, they could only crouch in that dim entry, pray for some later deliverance, and watch with affrighted eyes the pirates' assault on the bunk-house.

This began at once, to a wild, raucous clamour, but the spoilers perceived how impregnable a lair the bunk-house seemed likely to prove. They emerged, however, from unseen depths with a ponderous length of steel tubing, and, bearing this between them, they braced themselves up to ram.

Anticipating some such move, those within the redoubt had made all haste to unscrew the covers and also the glasses of the two forward ports, creating a couple of loopholes through which Mr. MacNagg and the skipper thrust forth their rifles. With terrible accuracy they at once let blaze, picking off every rascal within range. The ram-bearers, letting go, allowed their burden to thud upon the deck, while they themselves fled forrard as fleetly as their legs would take them, being chivvied by a spraying rattle of lead. Then it was that Dick Brand, gripping suddenly at his shoulder, fell back with a muffled word.

"What's up?" whispered Gwynn.

"I—I think I'm hit! One of those bullets . . . a sort of hot sting——"

Then, with an odd, sinking sensation, Dick's overwrought senses abruptly left him.

Dick Brand, after some ten or twelve minutes, opened his eyes again, to find that his jacket was off and that a tightly drawn band encircled his upper arm. He was still in the shelter of the deck-passage, and his father was bending near.

"Better now?" whispered the Major.

"Yes. Have you——"

"I've rigged it up as well as I can with a hanky. Only a flesh-wound—a sort of ploughed furrow. You'll be right as a trivet presently."

"Thanks. I—I was a fool to go off like that. I say, what has happened?"

"Everything—almost. Tim and I saw you boys were cut off, so we turned back to your aid. We were just behind when you were hit. Gwynn is still here, and also O'Flannel. We four, I fancy, are the only white folk left alive on the *Colombo*."

"What! You—you surely don't mean——"

"I mean that the others have got clean away. It was all done in a jiffy, and with such quietness that even I didn't suspect. Those Chinese villains, after their last gruelling, kept well away forrard, or else below. Even yet they don't know what's happened. For

my part, I saw a smudge of figures going up over the poop and dropping overside. Then, slipping to the port rail, I noticed one of the moored craft detach itself and slide gently away. It's such a pitch-dark night that, even now, I can't be absolutely sure ; but I firmly believe, indeed, that our pals have done a neat flit and——”

“ Ssh ! What's that ? Those fiends are crawling up again ! ”

A trail of shadowy blotches could be seen slinking past. On hands and knees they groped, smoothing their palms upon the deck. Then, when they had salved the steel pipe, they were observed to rise with it, and next moment they were dashing upon the bunk-house with all their combined weight.

The old door hove bodily off its hinges, but the splitting cry of conquest that went up soon lapsed into a mumble of chagrin. Major Brand's senses had not deceived him. Captain Elbow and his fellows had indeed accomplished their escape.

The pirate herd, obedient to a thin, grating voice that dominated the rest, began without more ado to clear up the wrack of combat, using rough-and-ready methods that made very short shift of the matter.

Thereafter the arrested throb of machinery

once more broke forth, and the *Colombo*, aroused from her lolling pose, began to make fresh headway. Brought round, she nosed steadily to pick up a brand-new course, after which, quite ably controlled, she settled down to her full quantum of knots.

"Whatever are we to do?" whispered Dick. "It's only by a miracle that we've escaped their search so far, and we are bound to be nabbed with the first peep of daylight. No doubt about it, we are in a most deadly hole!"

"True," agreed his father. "This position makes one chafe; yet I don't know what we're to do save wait and——"

"How about that bunk-house? I guess we'd feel healthier there if we only dared crawl as far. What——"

"Ssh!"

A mellow disc glowed forth in the murk, and a man's form went padding by. Up near the breached bunk-house he paused, moving stealthily about. Then, wheeling round, he began to retrace his steps, pacing straight towards where they lay.

The concealed four squeezed up into their corner, striving vainly somehow to banish their legs. There was no time to essay anything more effective, for the poised lantern now streamed its light down the alley-way as its

bearer stood at the inlet. Every phase of his visage stood sharply defined—the protrusive jowls, the callous lips, the domed, receding forehead.

It was a vision for a strong man to shudder at, and as for our friends, they felt suddenly frozen. Dick's fingers turned over his father's wrist like a vice, but neither was conscious of this till full five minutes later—not, in fact, until the sinister apparition, departing as noiselessly as it came, had faded somewhat from their startled brains.

“ Good powers ! ” whispered Dick, his throat curiously dry. “ Did you see who that was ? ”

“ I saw right enough,” was the grim answer. “ It was Hang Loo ! ”

They knew they could not be in error. The forbidding headpiece of that notorious criminal, Hang Loo, was pictured broadcast throughout the China Seas : it was posted on the bund at Penang ; it could be viewed at Hong-Kong, Singapore, or Manila. Here, indeed, on this very ship, was the arch scoundrel whom they had set out to glean some news of. Well, they had met him face to face, yet, behold their ironic plight !

At the first pale glimmer of dawn the old *Colombo* churned round to a standstill, after having made a galloping run of two hours at

the head of a growing monsoon. The rattling of her hawse-pipe proclaimed the paying out of a cable, after which there was a drifting below of every sound and movement. A sing-song of voices from the mid-saloon suggested some sort of junketing, and the stiff-jointed four were again discussing a move when the near ladder creaked and a sallow-cheeked person came tip-toeing into the corridor.

“ Sen ! ”

Dick Brand, forgetting all peril in a sudden gush of elation, cried the name aloud. For it was indeed Sen, their trusty ally, the native cook whom they supposed to be lying lifeless on the plates of the power-room !

Their cheer at his survival was more than equalled by his delight on encountering them, for a daring plan that revolved in his brain was suddenly made feasible by the aid they could render.

“ We come now to um Siamese island,” whispered he. “ She called Koh Deng, and she lie only one-two cable’s length abeam. That’s where they allo gather plenty fine swallows’ nests—nests what first-chop China folk eatum for dinner. One man, Jokum Fo, he rent um islands—he in charge. Jokum Fo, he Hang Loo’s most bitter enemy, and Hang Loo swear vengeance. That’s why Hang Loo

take um ship. He attack island, he steal all Jokum's bird-nests, all Jokum's money. Birds' nests they record harvest, them fill this big ship. They worth seventeen thousand ticals ! Hang Loo steal um all ! ”

“ Then that's been Hang Loo's game from the first ? ” asked Major Brand.

“ Sure ting.”

“ How about those junks by which he boarded us ? ”

“ Left um both behind. But small sail-boat lie towed astern. We plop quietly into that one, up sail an' blow over to island allo slick. You savvy ? ”

“ Are all those vermin below deck ? ”

“ Sure. Hark you, hear um sing. They all drink drink ; get um ready to sack Koh Deng ! Not um moment to waste. Come 'long ! ”

Like ghosts of the dawn they stole towards the poop deck, mounted it, and came with thumping hearts to the taffrail. There, sure enough, rocking in the purr of wind, lay a small native craft with matting sail that hung rumpled from its slender mast. Trusting their lives to Sen's pilotage, they swung over after him, and swiftly obeyed his motions of guidance.

Stiffening up to the pull of her sail, the little

craft quivered to life, curved to the billows, and so bounded cleanly away. The operation had proved easy after all, but scarcely twenty fathoms of intensely blue sea divided them from the tramp before a yell denoted their discovery. A minute or so later the deck of the *Colombo* was teeming with life.

The boys flung back awed glances.

"Now for it!" exclaimed the Major. "See, they're rushing to lower a boat!"

"Well, let them," muttered Dick. "It's our race anyhow; we've got 'em licked before they launch. Here we are, right under the island—in another three minutes we shall have rounded that jut of rock. My word, and it's fairyland!"

Never, certainly, had volcanic strata produced a more beautiful effect, for the face of the isle was a rainbow dream in rose and mauve and amber, deepening down to purplish-blues. Added to this, crowning the vast pile, there uprose a mile-long fringe of exotic vegetation.

Driving into a belt of beach, Sen leapt nimbly ashore and plunged at once for an upward track, followed hard by the four adventurers. The ascent they had chanced on was a dizzy one, but as the whole formation was more or less precipitous there did not seem much choice of routes.

About their heads whirled a whistling flight of blue-black swifts, builders of the edible nests; and presently, in a weirdly misshapen fissure, they alighted on one of those creations. It seemed to be made of creamy-white gelatine, mixed up with moss and feathers. The two boys, even in a less anxious moment, would hardly have been tempted to "have a bite," yet they knew that a pound of these nests, to a Chinese *gourmet*, was valued at perhaps eight taels of silver!

It was soon explained why those Hang Loo scoundrels had refrained from immediate pursuit. Our friends, on topping the first summit, beheld a number of *rua pets*—island guard boats—beating round the bluff below. Hang Loo had deemed it prudent thus early to avoid any fuss that might arouse the islanders' suspicions.

"Cheerio!" cried Dick. "I see huts—a whole cluster of 'em—propped up by piles on the very face of the cliff. That, I bet, is where the nest-hunters live. And Sen's beckoning to us; no doubt he's spotted some one!"

The dogged four, at imminent risk of their necks, scaled up to that craggy rift in which Sen now stood. They peered into a wide crevasse, and on a slender ledge, some twelve feet down, a man with an atapa basket at his

waist was being lowered on rattans by some others. Far below were the nests he was intent on gathering, and even the armed guards standing near were too absorbed to lift their gaze.

"Hullo!" shouted Evan Gwynn. "Hullo-o!"

The effect was startling. Whipping up their pieces, the zealous warders let bang on the instant, causing limestone splinters to whiz round the luckless visitors' ears. They ducked as the next salvo came, and not a jot too rapidly, Sen proclaiming with eloquent tongue that he and his "brothers" were all "good fellas"—that, indeed, they had not come to rob the island but to save it.

The guards, only half appeased, came clambering up, and Sen, with much gesticulation, told of the impending attack, pointing to the *Colombo* where she lay outside the shoals. Four of the steamer's boats, in confirmation of his words, were at that moment being put off, full from bow to helm with Hang Loo's bevy, every man of whom was palpably armed to the teeth.

No time was squandered after that. Sen and our four friends were led at a run across the tufty plateau and into the belting jungle. Here, by mazy paths, they threaded their way through a tropic growth of creeper and fern,

spangled now and again by exquisite orchids. At length they came to a middle prominence of cliff, whose grassy, beetling sides would have puzzled a goat to climb. Its southern scarp, more broken and girt with crevices, was provided with rattan hand-grips to assist one in mounting.

By such means, terribly blown, and drenched with sweat, the excited little party clambered at length on to the very crest of Koh Deng. In the middle of this, surrounded completely by a massive bamboo palisading, were the Jokum Fo's great store-huts, and also his own bungalow.

Our friends were soon the centre of an excited throng, and the Jokum himself appeared without delay. He proved to be a person of girth and dignity, but Oriental aloofness received no small shock by reason of Sen's tidings. He turned briskly towards the white visitors.

"I wonder," he said, slipping unexpectedly into English, "whether either of you gentlemen understands motors?"

"Well, I do—just a bit," answered Dick Brand.

"Enough to pilot a motor-boat?"

"Oh yes; I could rise to that all right."

"Good! The private boat by which I tour

my islands is petrol-driven, but the man who works it is now out in a rua pet and might take an hour to find. Yet that boat must be used at once—to fetch help from Koh Hammun, the next island.”

“Right ; I’m your man ! ” exclaimed Dick.

“Thank you. Ah Mun, you will go as well. Tell them at Koh Hammun that every man within hail must be sent here at once, well armed, and in the fastest craft. Remember, we have been using this place as our depot ; the pikuls of nests stored up here are worth a huge fortune. At all costs they must be saved. Now go ! ”

Ah Mun swung off at once, with Dick hard on his heels, while on the crest things soon waxed to a fever of excitement. Sounds of rapid firing from the weather beach suggested that the oncoming pirates were having a brush with the rua pets, and the nest-hunters, now wildly running in from all directions, brought witness of this.

A better site for a garrison would have been hard to find. The Jokum’s scouts, on their last journey up, destroyed the rattan hand-grips, so that, normally speaking, this eyrie was no longer accessible. But Hang Loo’s mob, having the hearts of tigers, clawed fiercely to their task, with the result that swarthy, strenuous

arms began to appear in a brief course of minutes, followed by the glint of steel fast bit in powerful teeth.

"Fire!" cried the Jokum Fo.

The guards poured down a volley, scoring fewer hits than might have been expected, this being due to the fact that the assault, though clinging on like flies, were still protected by the outcrops of boulders. Not indeed till they were at arm's length with the brink did head and shoulders rise fully revealed. But then, of course, they formed simple marks, and the first half-dozen, drilled clean through the skull, went pitching headlong backwards, their bodies sweeping many another off his balance as they spun to the scrub below.

Nothing daunted, however, the rest swarmed grimly on, agile as apes, and cunning in use of every dent and niche they could worm to. As they came they spread, so that now they began to appear in a widening fan—spreading more and more till every point began to be threatened.

The islanders, all too few to picket so wide a circle, sped hither and thither, taking pot shots whenever a pate came bobbing to view. Major Brand and Tim O'Flannel, both of whom had been given rifles, proved easily the best marksmen, and they covered, with deadly

effect, the looser firing in front. Thus, for upwards of twenty minutes, the slithering hordes were somehow held at bay, but their losses were not yet serious, and Hang Loo's crafty wits soon hit on a trick of unity. He ordered every man to win the highest ledge within shelter, and there to lie still, awaiting his cry for a great and final assault.

The result was formidably effective. After a gnawing spell of quiet, during which not a knuckle rose to view, there went up one piercing note, and then came a frantic rush. Nothing could stem it. The rifles roared like a broadside, but their reeking muzzles could speak but once before that impetuous mob, well over the marge, was hurtling upon them with hack and thrust.

"To shelter!" roared Jokum Fo. "Quick—for your lives!"

Our friends understood by instinct, though the Jokum had spoken Chinese, and they were well in the forceful stampede that now swept through the palisade gap. Though reserved till the latest moment, this retreat was grandly successful, the stockade being shut and barred before one of the pirates could reach it.

After this, for ten tremendous minutes, Hang Loo's most reckless tactics were futile to a degree. The bamboo outwork was sown with

natural loopholes, and these were manned by the Jokum's picked guards. These latter, at a pinch, proved shots of a clever order, and they gleaned so heavy a toll from every dash that Hang Loo's cohort, again and again, was scattered in crazy disorder.

Milder spirits might have lost tenacity, but these scourges of the sea, reared up on blood and violence, were too ruthless to be given actual check. Though depleted of half their numbers, and stung to flee at intervals, yet always they returned, growing ever more rash, and hurling themselves bodily upon the piles in the hope of crashing them down.

Hang Loo himself, though always to the fore, bore a charmed life. As yet he had emerged scathless, and his whole fiendish mind was bent upon finding that one weak spot which he knew must exist somewhere. Each succeeding charge, to this end, was always led upon some fresh patch of the palisading, and at last, to the Jokum's dire dismay, there was a sudden caving in.

No sooner was it located than the whole mass of the assailants, yelling now like very demons, bent every sinew they possessed to this flaw in the defences, until, with a shivering crash, one whole section of piles went crumpling inward.

The two deafening, horrific moments that followed will live for ever in Evan Gwynn's memory. He had no rifle to wield—nothing, in fact, save that engineer's spanner which he chanced to have kept in his jacket. Lucky, indeed, he had done so, for the shrewd work it now performed in turning aside those dabs was the sole and slender shield that saved his life.

Major Brand, battling in the very thick of it, accounted for some four or five wretches before being rushed down. But Tim O'Flannel plunged to stand over him, in his huge hands a length of splintered gate-post ; his rifle was lost, but with this new weapon he made desperate play.

Back ebbed the sturdy islanders, back till their shoulder-blades were crushed against those store-sheds which they offered their lives to save. But they had come to the last extremity, for a rifle was no longer the superior weapon. The marauders, indeed, full hoarse with triumph, were leaping to make an end, when—when a thud of feet sounded behind !

The relief party !

Thirty strong, all fresh to the fray, the stalwarts from Koh Hammun poured through the shattered outwork and turned the whole tide of things in one exhilarating moment. It was

the wildest babel. With the cheers of the gallant were incontinently mixed the snarl and oath of the corsairs, so that, for a pulsing measure of time, confusion was too complete for any rational order to be given. Some score of the pirates broke hotly away, and then it was that a penetrating voice uprose above the tumult.

“After them! After them!” It was the Jokum Fo who shouted. “Ten katis to the man who takes Hang Loo!”

Meanwhile, having landed a numerous party at the most convenient point, Dick Brand was steering the motor-boat towards its original anchorage. He had some trouble about this, for the bay was exceedingly shallow. He was obliged, in fact, to “feel” for the sandy channel by which he had run his craft out, so that some little time had sped before he lay up to the creek staging. Then, picking up the repeater that had been left for him, he sprang out, his attention in that same instant being arrested by a commotion on the steep.

A man’s figure was just descending anyhow, rolling and pitching in a blind and desperate scurry. Reaching the shingle, this man shook himself together and stood up stiffly, his bared and heaving chest within forty paces of Dick’s levelled rifle. For Dick had not hesitated, and

his sighting was absolutely cool. He pressed the trigger, whereupon, just as he had stood, so the man fell—like a log.

Voices rang out above, and two minutes later an excited knot of islanders were crowding to this spot. Evan Gwynn was the first to arrive, and he gripped his pal's arm.

"Hang Loo!" he whispered. "So you've done it after all."

"*We've* done it," answered Dick Brand, eyeing the other gravely.

But neither was thinking of rewards. The world had been rid of one black spot, and that was reward enough.

QUEST TEN

THE CRYSTAL GODS

“**A**DVENTURES to the Adventurous.” So runs the old saying, and certainly it appeared to be true in reference to our own particular trio.

They found, on getting back to the homeland, that an invitation awaited them to visit Glenowie, the Scottish estate recently bought by Doctor MacKirk, who thereby became a laird.

There were two reasons for accepting: Doctor MacKirk, retired army surgeon, had been a brother officer of Major Brand, while Rob, his nephew and ward, was the pal of Dick's school days. An easy spell 'mid banks and braes seemed good to think of, but—it was not to be. This strange Quest, however, was fated to be a different sort of thing from their breathless affairs abroad.

Major Brand, as it happened, was not “in at the start,” for, soon after his arrival at

Glenowie, he had accepted a few days' invitation to shoot on a neighbouring moor. Dick and Rob, having been round to watch the sport, were making their way back over the rough moorland tracks—pretty hard going for bicycle tyres. It was as late as half-past ten, and the night dusky, when the two boys plugged up a private winding road which led them to Glenowie. Sudden shouts, away in the fir-woods, made Dick exclaim,—

“Be careful, Rob. I'm certain there are one or two people galloping this way. They stand to run us down in such darkness. Ring your bell!”

Rob set his bell throbbing, and Dick struck his as well. The notes rang through the dense preserves on either hand, but the boys had not guessed how near the runners really were. This bushy, little-used approach was somewhat moss-grown in parts, and two flying figures had thudded round a bend even as the bells pealed out. Rob, his machine, and a huge colliding body went down with a crash. Dick leapt from his bicycle into the left hedge as the second man dodged and sped past.

“Hold them! Stop them!” were the shouted words now borne from the throats of other advancing men.

As the first runner scrambled up from his fall

Dick twitched his bike across the road to act as a sort of barrier. The fellow, seeing the action, and courting no further delay, veered at once and plunged into the timber. Rob, having regained his feet, was fumbling to restore his bike, when the pursuers arrived hot-foot. There were three of them.

"Which way?" the foremost panted.

Dick replied promptly. "One man scooted right along; the other dashed into the wood."

"Did ye notice 'em? D'ye ken which was the bigger o' the twa?"

"I had barely a glimpse. The taller, I should fancy, was the one who stuck to the road."

"Jo Muir! He's the ane we want most. Come on, lads!"

"What's wrong?" exclaimed Dick.

"Salmon poachers!" was the rejoinder, and the three went swinging down the track.

"Poachers!" echoed Dick. "I say, Rob, here's excitement! How are you—anything smashed?"

"I'm all right. I only hope the machine is ditto! Whew! Those were uncle's servants, but what chumps they were not to divide forces. One of them, at least, might have gone into the scrub after my man."

"Exactly what I was thinking, and I vote

that we chivvy him ourselves. Are you fit enough?"

"Rather!"

Dick waited only for that answer before he himself was off. Rob was smartly at his heels, but he was scarcely into the tangled wild growth before he realized how useful it might be to have a light. His own cycle light had been extinguished in the fall, but, returning quickly, he whipped off his pal's.

Dick, by this time, had waded well into the wood. Progress at first was very slow, but the flicker of the cycle lamp behind presently helped him immensely.

"Good idea of Rob's!" he muttered; "but I'm afraid we're too late. That poacher chap, no doubt, knows the place well, and by this time—hullo!"

He had blundered into a narrow path, or side track, and he imagined that he had seen a lithe shadow take cover some score of yards farther on. He headed for the spot at once, and his ears were rewarded by a distinct rustle in the patch of low-growing hazels beside which he now halted.

"Rob—this way!" he cried, and made a hard, straight dash through the unresisting bushes.

Had the growth been thorny, or of a closer nature, the boy's heedless pace must certainly

have resulted in a woeful cropper. As it was, the young nut-twigs cowed and snapped before him; an upset was averted until he had smashed right through, and was upon the fringe of a little clearing; then he did tumble—full across the creeping body of a man! Flinging around swiftly, Dick grasped a leg.

“Rob! Rob!” he signalled, and dived again to get a better hold. But his quarry, his palms thrust out on either side, propelled himself backward with such robust agility that Dick, hugging at the legs, was bodily dragged along the tufty sward.

Rob, arriving with his lamp, had a single glimpse of the man as he paused suddenly, sat well up, and worked his legs free with a sudden steely jerk. That single movement seemed also to lift him to his feet, for he was gone like a glint of lightning.

“By Jove!” voiced Dick, “the fellow’s like an eel! Come on—after him!”

The pair resumed gamely enough, but they were not slow to grasp that the hunt was over. The deep gloom of the wood seemed this time to have silently swallowed up the man. With listening pauses, the boys made a series of short rushes, the last of which brought them through the trees again to the margin of a wide stretch of water, big and dim.

“Loch Glenowie, I suppose!” exclaimed Dick. “Good job I didn’t rush into it!”

The great sheet of water was sombre beneath the stars. In the centre of the loch was a small, fertile island—the preserved nesting-place of that rare bird, the purple heron.

“Well,” said Rob, “it seems to me we’d better get back to our bikes, and push up to the house as soon as we can. Uncle will certainly think we’re not coming.”

They found the machines pretty quickly, and wheeled on again without remounting. The lights of Glenowie were now shortly in view, and they entered upon the gravelled approach. Two figures were standing upon the steps—the figures of Doctor MacKirk and his head bailiff. The latter glanced around as the boys drew up.

“Ah, here coom the young gentlemen, sir,” he said, “so your mind can be easy on their account. Guid nicht, sir—guid nicht, young gentlemen.”

The bailiff crunched down the drive, and the boys were at once heartily greeted by the new laird, Doctor MacKirk.

“Come in! Come in!” cried the latter. “I had almost despaired of seeing you to-night. I understand from Hamish that you’ve had a brush with those confounded poachers.”

"Yes, rather a violent brush for Rob!" laughed Dick. "They knocked him over in their flight. Afterwards, Rob and I gave one fellow a chase, but failed to hold him. Did the keepers catch their man?"

"No, never got near him. It's getting too bad, this poaching, and that Jo Muir is the worst of them all. But come, boys; you must be starving. Supper is quite ready."

The boys' appetites were such that they were certainly quite disposed to begin, and little more was said until justice had been done to the repast.

"To hark back to those salmon poachers," said the doctor then. "Do I understand that you boys actually came to grips with one of them?"

"No, uncle, I don't believe we did."

It was Rob who said this, and Dick Brand stared at him in astonishment.

"Dick tackled a man whom he found stalking along one of the paths near the loch, but I don't believe it was the chap who knocked me off my bike."

"You mean, you don't think it was a poacher at all?"

"I don't know about that, uncle. My light was upon him for just an instant, as he kicked himself free from Dick's clutches. His skin

was curiously dark, as brown as a coffee-bean ; and he wore something quite out of the ordinary—a sort of loose blue tunic.”

The words moved Doctor MacKirk strangely. He leaned across the table. “ Can you describe this man’s features, Rob ? ”

“ I’m afraid I can’t, uncle.”

“ Do you think he was a foreigner ? ”

“ Very likely.”

“ Might have been—a Hindoo ? ”

Rob considered. “ Yes,” he said slowly ; “ I should think that would just fit him.”

The doctor seemed perturbed.

“ The fact is,” he explained, “ Glenowie, previous to my taking it, was owned by an invalid gentleman who had a Hindoo body-servant for many years. This servant sought re-employment with me. I gave him a trial, but soon found him out in countless acts of petty dishonesty, which he probably practised with impunity when attendant on an invalid. I couldn’t stand much of that. Having rated him soundly, I packed him off. He was a very vindictive type of fellow, and what you tell me ”—the doctor stroked his beard—“ what you tell me has set me wondering. Some one, this morning, played a very unaccountable trick on me.”

“ A trick ? ” echoed Dick.

“Yes. If you will come upstairs I will show you what I mean.”

The doctor led the way up a heavily fashioned staircase, bringing the boys into his study—a spacious apartment largely fitted with mellow oak panelling. Alcoves on either side of the mantel were fitted with books. The writing-table was before the window.

“When I retired last night,” began the doctor, “this correspondence table was quite clear of any sort of paper, the window was carefully secured, and the door locked from the outside with a key which I always have with me. But this morning, on letting myself in here, I found a sealed envelope addressed to myself lying on the writing-table. How did it come there? The window, remember—which is some thirty feet from the ground—was still fastened.”

“It does seem a puzzle,” declared Dick. “But was there anything inside the envelope?”

“Yes; this was inside.”

Doctor MacKirk slid out a drawer, and produced a sheet of paper. Upon it were these words :—

“Where is John Sherwood’s legacy? You have three days and three nights to live. No more.”

"Have you any idea what is meant by 'John Sherwood's legacy'?" Dick asked the doctor.

"Yes, I think I know what that means."

Glancing up, the boys saw that the speaker was smiling.

"The threat doesn't seem to alarm you," remarked Dick Brand.

"Well, no," declared the doctor; "it's a little too ridiculous to be alarming. It is plain, however, that some one is trying to frighten me. Who, I wonder? Above all things, how was this note spirited upon my table?"

"You've made inquiries in the house, I suppose?"

"Yes, but of course the servants know nothing."

Doctor MacKirk tossed back the paper with a laugh, and snapped-to the drawer. "So much for my little problem!" he said. "Now to other matters. You'd better select some reading while you're here, for I shall still keep this room locked. Those books on the shelves near the table won't interest you. Come over and look at some others."

They walked to the bookcase on the far side, where writings of a different kind were shelved.

"Help yourselves," said the doctor; and

Rob was just reaching for a volume when a slight noise caught his attention. So slight was it that the other two quite failed to notice it at all. But Rob glanced around, and next moment was excitedly pointing towards the writing-table.

A sealed envelope was reposing in the centre of the blotting-pad—an envelope which appeared to have dropped from nowhere !

Doctor MacKirk rushed to the table, picked up the packet, and then stared about him in sheer amazement.

“ There must be some one else in the room, boys ! ” he cried. “ Look round ! ”

But certainly there was no one in the room besides themselves, nor had any one come and gone by the doorway. Yet here in the doctor’s hand was this new, sealed missive, which Rob had actually heard delivered !

Doctor MacKirk slit the flap deftly, to find a message slightly different from the one he had got before. It was as follows :—

“ Where is John Sherwood’s legacy? You have three nights and two days to live. No more.”

The doctor thrust it all into his pocket. “ This enigma has got to be fathomed some-

how ! ” So saying, he put out his hand to a bell knob, but changed his mind, strode to the door, and shouted “ Craigie ! ”

Craigie was the doctor’s valet. He presented himself in a few moments, and his master crisply told him of this second mysterious occurrence.

“ I wanted to inform you, Craigie, that you need not wait up for me, because I propose to remain in this study all night.”

“ All night, sir ! ” echoed the man. “ Then you think, sir——”

“ From the way in which these slips are worded, I can only suppose that they are going to serve one up to me every twelve hours ! The next to arrive should be worded, ‘ *You have two days and two nights to live. No more.* ’ You see my idea ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Well, when the third arrives, I want to be sitting at my table with a revolver at hand—waiting.”

“ Yes, sir. You must let me watch as well.”

“ No, no, Craigie ; the affair is too trivial for us both to neglect our sleep. Still, it is very inexplicable, and I want to get at the bottom of it. I shall occupy the time with some writing I have by me.”

Some rapid discussion followed. In turn

the boys also wanted to share the doctor's vigil, but this offer also he flatly refused. In the end, however, he consented that Craigie should relieve him at four o'clock.

Soon after that the boys went off to their rooms.

The dark hours were slowly ticked off by the chiming clock on Doctor MacKirk's study mantelpiece as he sat at his table, his pen busy, a weapon at his hand. Twelve, one, two, three o'clock struck, and the candles burned lower and lower. It was at some time past three o'clock that nature got the better of his will, and, after sundry nods and starts, he sank into a leaden doze. Then——

Rob MacKirk sprang out of bed in the midst of a dream and huddled on some clothing. There was no doubt as to what had disturbed him. Some one in the next corridor but one appeared to be trying to rattle the house down. As Rob burst forth from his room he almost collided with Dick Brand.

"I say, what's the row?"

"Can't think—come on! It's somewhere near your uncle's study, anyhow."

"What time is it?"

"A little past four. . . . Hullo! it's Craigie. He can't get in!"

It was certainly the laird's man who was responsible for the clamour. As the boys joined him he ceased to shake the door.

"What's to be done?" he exclaimed. "I can't get any answer from within. We shall have to break the door, I suppose!"

"Rattle again," suggested Rob; "uncle may have fallen fast asleep."

"I defy him to sleep through the clatter I've been making! I don't like the looks of it, young gentlemen. . . . We'd better force the lock."

"I think so too," agreed Dick.

"Then here goes!"

Putting down his shoulder, Craigie plunged at the woodwork until it creaked. The two boys, lowering their shoulders in like fashion, lent strength to the next assault. The third combined drive, being nicely timed, formed a terrific impact; the holding was wrenched from the doorpost, and the barrier smashed open. They rushed in.

The study chair was empty. Doctor MacKirk was gone!

Dick's first impulse was to run to the window, and he found the catch well in place. They gaped around. There were signs of a fierce struggle. The candle was upset, and sheets of paper littered the floor.

“Rough work!” declared Craigie. “Yet how, in the name of miracles, could anybody get in here, and how did they carry the master out? There was only one key to this door, of that I am positive, and here that key is, you see, on the *inside* of the door! No, the master can’t possibly have been taken out by the doorway, and as for the window—well, that’s thirty feet from the ground. I don’t like the looks of it, gentlemen. There’s something queer about this here chamber. It seems as if the master has been conjured away in the same uncanny manner that those letters came.”

Other servants, being disturbed, were by this time crowded about the entrance.

“Dick,” exclaimed Rob, “here’s a job for you and your father. The Major is keen on any Quest, so he’s the very man for this. We’ll send for him at once!”

The proposal was acted upon and, in three parts of an hour, Major Brand was on the spot, accompanied by the faithful Tim O’Flannel. Major Brand listened to the particulars with close interest, and came to a decision at once.

“Glenowie is very old,” he said, “as old as the kings, and MacKirk has told me of a rumoured subway. He never paid attention to what he believed to be a legend; but now

not only the walls of this room must be tested, but also the floor and the ceiling as well."

The investigation was entered upon with a will. The other servants being sent about their duties, a select party of six, provided with tools, shut themselves into the study and got to work. They consisted of the Major, Tim, Craigie, the butler, and the two boys.

The ancient chimney was examined, the furniture shifted, one or two of the floor-boards taken up, the ceiling pierced, and some of the panelling actually removed. But it was all to no purpose. Such efforts as they made served only to persuade them that there was no secret about the construction of the study.

"Before calling the police," said the Major now, "let us split up and go over the nearer portions of the estate, to see if there are any traces to be found. You, Ross"—to the butler—"now that the lock is useless, might mount guard outside the study door and see that no one enters."

This arranged, the new effort commenced forthwith.

"Tam Glennon will be at the raft presently, taking the birds' food to Loch Glenowie," observed Craigie. "It wouldn't be a bad plan for the young gents to go with him and look around there."

“Good idea,” agreed Major Brand, and the boys set off. Meeting the keeper at the raft, they joined with him, and were pushed off at once.

“It’s a new raft, this,” the man presently informed them. “Our auld ane, the noo, we keep moored to yon island, to serve as a stepping-off place. . . . Well, here we are.”

They landed and, to their surprise, in the heart of the place, they came upon a gaunt pile of grey stone, the remains of a small house.

“We call it the Auld Lodge,” explained their guide. “It was a custom, years ago, for one o’ the men to bide here.”

The boys explored these remains and the island generally, getting a good view of the purple heron; but they could find no sign of the missing laird.

Getting back to the front of the house, they fell in with the Major and Craigie, neither of whom had discovered any clues. Feeling decidedly beaten, they returned in a body to the study. Ross stood faithfully at the door.

Craigie entered first, and gave a sharp exclamation. He rushed to the writing-desk. An envelope was lying there, face downwards, beside the ink-bottle. “Another of these amazing notes!” he cried.

The Major wheeled like lightning. "Ross," he demanded, "have you been at that door all the time?"

"Yes, sir," returned the butler stoutly; "every minute of it. Nobody has been in there since you left."

"And you have heard nothing?"

"Nothing, sir."

"This thing is altogether baffling!" uttered the Major. "Let me see what the latest is, Craigie."

"Why, it's addressed to you, sir," declared the valet, "and—good powers!—it's in the master's own handwriting!"

Such was undoubtedly the case. The Major tore open the covering, pulled out the enclosure, and read as follows:—

"DEAR BRAND,—By this time, no doubt, you have been told of my disappearance. Search for me in the house may be undertaken by you and the rest, but it will be of no use. Kindly observe my instructions. In the dressing-room adjoining my bedchamber is a safe, of which I enclose key. Unlock it, and take out green iron box, which you will find on top shelf. This, directly after dusk, I want you to place on the top of Auchlie Peak. Do not interfere with whoever comes to fetch it; do

not attempt to follow, and do not call in police. Upon the observation of these points my very life and safety depends. Though a prisoner for the time being, I am quite well.—Yours,

“ANDREW MACKIRK.”

Fumbling in the broken envelope, Major Brand brought forth the safe key referred to.

Dick Brand was the first to speak. “But where is this Auchlie Peak?” he asked.

“It’s a point on the coast, about a mile distant, above Auchlie Cove.”

“What is to be done?”

“These instructions must be followed out to the letter—no doubt about that. At night-fall that box must be deposited on Auchlie Peak. ’Pon my word, the whole affair is utterly bewildering. And this letter of MacKirk’s only serves to increase the mystery.”

“Can you see anything, Rob?”

The two boys were crouching on the little sandy shelf at the bottom of Auchlie Cove. Night had fallen, and the small iron receptacle had been set down on the peak as the doctor’s letter had instructed.

Without going counter to the missing gentleman’s wishes, the Glenowie party had determined to see all that they could. The Major,

Tim O'Flannel, and Craigie had elected to station themselves at two high points well away from the cliff, while Dick Brand and Rob, taking a very long detour, had found their way to a spot almost below the peak itself.

It was a long, tedious vigil. The light was uncertain, for the moon had not yet risen, but both boys lay quite still and strained their eyes upward.

Rob ceased his breathing suddenly, then clutched his pal's arm. "Did you see it?" he whispered tensely.

"I saw something!" declared Dick Brand.

"A man—he picked up the box. He came and went in a second. Dick, it's the same!"

"The same?"

"Yes, the Hindoo—the man you tackled last night! I'm certain."

"Here, easy, old man. How can you be certain? You saw no more than a movement, and——"

"Yes—that's why I am certain. That quick, snaky sort of twist convinced me. Here, come on. Let's scramble up!"

Reaching the summit, they found no one in sight, but, walking inland, they presently came upon Major Brand and Craigie. These two had descried nothing, nor had Tim O'Flannel

from his point ; but they listened eagerly to Rob's confident assertion.

"That Hindoo is certainly a bad lot," declared the Major, "and ripe enough, I am sure, for any villainy. It is terrible to think that the doctor is in some way at his mercy. But come, let us go straight back to Glenowie. I have something I want to tell you."

Directly they were gathered in the mystic study, the Major opened with a question, "As to the two threatening fiats received yesterday by the doctor, they each, I understand, began with the words, '*Where is John Sherwood's legacy?*' Is that not so?"

"Yes," affirmed Rob.

"Did your uncle tell you what was meant by that?"

"No, he did not tell us."

"Well, I think perhaps I can, for I have a little surprise in my pocket. About ten days ago, just after I came, MacKirk informed me that he was joint executor in a very curious legacy, and, in the event of his own death, he would wish me to act for him in the matter. All particulars, he added, would be found in an envelope, which he handed to me, and which was marked, '*To be perused only after my death.*—(Signed) ANDREW MACKIRK.'

"Now," pursued the Major, "I have that

packet here, and, in view of the present extremity, I think it my duty to open it at once—to see if it will help us to solve this perplexing affair.”

The others concurred in this very readily, and Major Brand broke the seal. Having scanned the document rapidly, he commenced to read it aloud. This was what they heard :—

“DEAR BRAND,—This MS. will take you back to the brave defence of Rorke’s Drift in January 1879, at which, as an army surgeon, I was present—before my transfer to India. One of the unfortunates in the infirmary there was a Corporal Sherwood, and he was literally dragged from the hands of marauding savages by a certain Private Dilkes. I attended to Sherwood’s injuries, but, on the night of the 23rd, he felt himself that he could not survive.

“Having asked for his rescuer, Dilkes, to be called near, he placed in my hands a stout box containing three curious little yellow figures—gods, no doubt—very roughly shaped. He had bartered for them, he declared, when stationed in another part of Africa, and where they had been regarded as ‘fetish,’ until their devotees had tired of them.

“Sherwood believed that these figures might be of value as curios. He had, he explained,

a wife and son—then a child of four—in England, and he told of the town where they would probably be found. Dilkes and I were to take one of the figures, sell it, and divide the proceeds between ourselves; the other pair we were to hand over to the dying man's relatives. We both solemnly swore that these wishes should be carried out.

“Believing the figures to be formed of some quite common sort of quartz, I thought very slightly of the matter; but, urged by Dilkes, I duly placed one of the dwarfish objects in the hands of some London dealers. You may have heard of the sensation it caused. It was not of common quartz at all. Held before a strong flame, that figure transmitted the effect of pure, glowing sunlight. Neither geologists nor curio-hunters had ever seen such stuff before. They christened the substance ‘Golden Crystal,’ and the figure realized £800! So much has been written about it since, that I’ve no doubt the others would fetch much more if put up for sale.

“Despite all efforts, Sherwood’s widow and son were never traced, though I did not cease to inquire, and, at intervals, to advertise. Dilkes, on the other hand—who, unhappily, had disgraced himself long since and been discharged from the service—constantly as-

sented that everything reasonable had been done, and demanded that I should now take one of the remaining two figures for myself, and give him the other.

“Dilkes’s character, indeed, since his dismissal from the army, has been on the downward grade. He has annoyed me without ceasing, and has twice been to see me at Glenowie. On each of these last occasions he has made a noisy scene in demanding what he calls his ‘share’ in Sherwood’s legacy, saying he would get what was ‘his right’ somehow, even if he had to break in for it. I then assured him that the figures were not in the house.

“For the sake of being able to tell him this, I have arranged a peculiar hiding-place which, in appointing you executor after my death, I am about to reveal. The path beyond the outlet of Loch Glenowie leads down a slope of fern beside the falling water. At the bottom of the wood, where the current broadens, it is crossed from the path by a tiny bridge of stone. Stooping, a man may enter the water and creep beneath this bridge. Among the stones of which the footbridge consists will be found one of red granite.

“Behind this granite is a box containing the two yellow figures, still waiting to be

claimed by the relatives of the late Corporal Sherwood."

Major Brand folded the writing and put it away. "That is all," he said. "And now, at any rate, we know what was meant by the question, '*Where is John Sherwood's legacy?*' And we are guided to another theory—that the ex-soldier, Dilkes, is a party to the present conspiracy, and that Doctor MacKirk has been rendered a prisoner with the object of compelling him to give up one or both of these curious little 'fetishes.'"

"That may be correct," ventured Rob; "but, if it is, what was the purpose of uncle's letter to you this morning? If these wonderful little idols—or whatever they are—are really hidden beneath the bridge, as that manuscript states, then the box he directed us to put on Auchlie Peak could not have been the one his captors are after."

"Very true," mused the Major. "That letter was probably written under compulsion. MacKirk is nothing if not staunch. He would rather sacrifice some of his own property than forsake a solemn trust. One wonders whether your uncle's communication to-day was written to gain time, or—by Jove!" he broke off, as the result of sudden inspiration—"the code!"

Excitedly Major Brand sprang to his feet, fumbling in his pockets, and presently he tugged forth the object under discussion—the doctor's morning letter. Beneath the lamp-light he scanned it hurriedly.

"It is," he burst out again, "the code! Why in the world didn't I think of this before?"

The others were gathered by the speaker in astonishment.

"For a period," he hastened to explain, "I served, as you know, with your uncle in India, and there, among ourselves, we used a simple private code. Rambling dispatches sometimes contained hidden pithy messages. Having written his dispatch, the sender quickly pressed his thumb-nail upon certain letters, which letters, when taken in order, or slightly rearranged, conveyed a vital meaning."

"And is it so with this?" exclaimed Dick eagerly.

"Yes, yes! See, there is a deep dent on the 'S' in 'Search,' the 't' in 'the,' the 'u' in 'house,' the 'd' in 'undertaken,' and the 'y' in 'you.' Thus, we already have the word 'Study.' And we shall quickly get the rest, I fancy."

The Major, in this fashion, spelt along quickly, the total result being two words, "*Study bookshelves.*"

“ Shure, but what can it mane ? ” muttered Tim O’Flannel ; and they all turned to the bookshelves in the embrasure near the window.

Then light dawned upon the Major. “ In ransacking this room,” he cried, “ we lifted out the bookcase on the other side, but these shelves, seeming to be so rigid, we passed over ! Come, the books ! Out with them at once ! ”

Next moment, with all swiftness, he was pulling out the volumes, calling on the others to assist. They felt a thrill of wonder as they set about it. Was the secret of this room really to be solved at last ?

Once free of books, they found that the shelves slipped out quite easily, only the up-rights being fixed. They tapped the panelling behind. It was hollow beyond all doubt. In vain they sought for some sort of catch or ingenious fastening.

“ We must break it through ! ” declared the Major, scarcely able to repress his energy. “ Craigie, will you get a lantern of some sort as sharply as you possibly can ? ” So saying, he twitched out a drawer and possessed himself of Doctor MacKirk’s revolver, which was still charged.

Craigie, light in hand, had returned within the minute. It was then, when they were quite ready to start, that Dick got an idea.

“Perhaps the panel slides!” he exclaimed; and he found, at almost the first attempt, that such indeed was the case.

Major Brand thrust the lantern into the cavity.

“Yes, yes,” he whispered; “there are steps here, trending down between the walls. They are very squeezed-up. Follow me cautiously, one at a time!”

With hearts beating high, they passed down that moist-smelling, close-built way — down and still down into the earth itself. A beamed, clay-like passage was gained at last, which struck forward on a more level course. It was a long journey; they went faster and faster. At length the earthen tunnel gave place to one of stone, from the upper curve of which depended some scores of limy stalactites.

Ahead was a dim light, and presently some broader steps ascending. They went up smartly, to find themselves in a wide, low chamber, with a sort of clay ceiling supported by colossal cross-beams. The place was lit by an expiring candle.

On one side was a ponderous oaken bench, with ungainly forms to match on either side of it. At the head of the bench, however, was an ancient, high-backed seat, and upon this, a prisoner bound, sat—Doctor MacKirk!

The prisoner appeared to be quite alone. Craigie's pocket-knife came out readily, and his master was set free.

"Tell me," demanded the doctor at once, "what has just been happening? My captors, supposing that you blundered and put the wrong box on Auchlie Peak—they found it half full of coppers—developed afterwards a somewhat ugly mood. Until ten minutes ago they have been along that tunnel towards the house. When they rushed through they derided me by saying that they knew now where Sherwood's legacy was actually concealed, and that they were going straight to take it. What have you been saying in the study? Have you——"

Major Brand understood in a trice. His reading of the doctor's statement had been overheard by the rascals who had so impudently captured him, and they were now, indeed, on the track of the valuables. He explained to the doctor in a few swift words. "The exit!" he cried; "how can we get out of this place? Where are we?"

"Heron's Island, on Loch Glenowie," was the doctor's equally swift reply. "We are beneath the floor of the Old Lodge. Come—after me—sharply!"

He rushed for one corner, where a number

of flint ledges, projecting from the wall, formed steps to the roof. Mounting these, he forced back an iron wedge on the wall side of one great roof slab. At the opposite edge was a rusted ring.

Hooking a finger through this ring, the doctor pulled downwards. The slab swivelled on its supporting beam, providing a considerable cavity. Doctor MacKirk passed up with some activity, calling on the others to follow.

With incredible speed the whole party had mounted the floor of the Old Lodge, and had passed from it into the open air. Doctor MacKirk still leading, they ran along the densely grown island path, the moonbeams through the foliage lighting them fitfully as they went. Bursting through to the water's edge, Doctor MacKirk uttered a note of dismay.

"The old raft!" he ejaculated. "It's gone! We ought to have thought of that. Those rogues, of course, have been using it to cross the water. We have no means of getting to the wood, and every moment is precious."

But Dick had already pulled off his boots, and he now flung off his coat.

"I'll swim and get a raft," he declared, "and be here with it in a twink."

As may be imagined, excitement among the waiting four rose almost to bursting point. Dick, swimming strongly across, chanced upon the old raft, for that one was floating nearest, and was untethered. Upon it was lying a roughly cut, improvised pole. Clambering aboard, Dick punted back with a series of spirited thrusts.

All were embarked in a few moments, though the rotting barks dipped treacherously beneath such unwonted cargo. The crossing was safely made, however, and all were out and running for the woodland track.

Major Brand was ahead. Striking the downward path by the clattering water, he made a headlong descent, for the thick, sodden turf, and the splashing of the fall, served fully to cover his approach.

Ahead was the tiny footbridge, with a flicker of light beneath it. They were within twenty feet of the arch before a figure bobbed out from it, and flung up a warning cry. The enemy had scented danger. There was a scuttle through the water, and then a fugitive form on either side of the stream.

"After them!" was the Major's cry, and after them they went. But in the hurry, unfortunately, the boys—and they were fleetest of foot—sped both after the same man. It

chanced to be the Hindoo of their former adventure, and this time, his freedom being in jeopardy, he was straining every fibre to get clear.

Tim O'Flannel was off after the other man, and they came to grips at the brink of a tiny glen. Tim's enormous vigour, however, scarcely paid, for the thump with which he put down his man rolled both heavily upon a fringe of growth, which broke beneath their weight. With wild cries they went crashing into the glen, and Tim got rather the worst of it. He was sitting up, rubbing his pate, when Doctor MacKirk was heard shouting for all to return.

"It's all right," cried he; "they haven't got the plunder!"

As a matter of fact, in arranging this novel storing-place, the doctor had done his work well; he had gone so far as to employ cement. The rogues, with only a couple of jack-knives to labour with, had quite failed to remove the protecting slab.

Later, however, directly they returned, the boys were dispatched to the house—Dick to change, Rob for chisels. The box containing the precious little figures was then brought forth, safe and sound.

And now to wind up.

The Hindoo, being dismissed from Glenowie, had felt revengeful. When Dilkes had last called, he had overheard all his threats to the doctor concerning the Sherwood legacy, and he had seen Dilkes's address in Liverpool. He had sought him out at a small lodging-house, and had told him that, since his invalid master's death, he alone knew of the old-time entrance to the study at Glenowie. If Dilkes cared to join with him, they might use this entry to search the study for the valuables to which he—Dilkes—appeared to lay so strong a claim; or, if needs be, to overpower the long-stubborn doctor, and force him to reveal the whereabouts of the "fetish."

Dilkes, tempted by the amount which he knew the figures would fetch, and by the notion that they were now rightly his, in return for the service he rendered their late owner at Rorke's Drift, consented at last to make the attempt.

The mysterious delivery of the notes had been very simple. When the panel was slid the space between the book-tops and the shelves made it easy for the missive to be jerked through quickly on to the writing-table. Waiting until Doctor MacKirk slept, the Hindoo and Dilkes had entered the study by quietly removing three rows of books and three

shelves from the back. So was the doctor kidnapped.

As a matter of fact, those mysterious notes had been designed wholly for the sake of puzzling the doctor, and with the hope of inducing him to keep sentinel in the study. As a ruse, it had succeeded even sooner than the schemers had expected.

The real claimant to the figures, John Sherwood's son, turned up soon after. On receiving news of his father's death, his mother had taken him abroad with some emigrating friends. The advertisement had only recently been noticed. Doctor MacKirk duly handed over the troublesome legacy, and with no small feeling of relief.

QUEST ELEVEN

THE JEWELLED QUETZAL

OUR three adventurers, just after returning from Scotland, were engaged in so many strange affairs that it becomes hard to make a selection. There was the curious case of "The Cave of Brass," and the amazing Quest of "The White Sphinx." These, however, while of novel character, were perhaps somewhat brief, and lacking in high excitement. The other enterprises, while fraught with danger and hair-breadth moments, were not of special interest in themselves—and two of them, it must be admitted, were partial failures.

Perhaps that exploit in Costa Rica had better be set down now, if only for the sake of getting it told aright. It was this enterprise which chiefly brought our trio into the public eye, but most of the press reports were misleading in detail. One newspaper confidently stated that a member of the party had been sacrificed on an Indian altar. This was not

true ; yet nearly so, as our narrative shall prove.

Our friends, home again, had been spending a quiet week at Broadlands, engaged in nothing more arousing than golf. It was after a round on the links that father and son returned to find a visitor awaiting them—no other than Sir Byall Maitland, F.R.O.S., an enthusiastic bird collector.

Major Brand, following on service rendered, had himself been elected a member of the Ornithological Society, and, as such, had been casually following a heated correspondence between the brilliant president of that body and the wealthy Sir Byall Maitland. The latter was a tall, bony man, with quick-blinking eyes, always particularly fierce in argument, and hard to be quelled. It was this trait, indeed, which had brought him to Broadlands, and he came to the point with his usual patness.

“ Brand, how-d’ye-do, how-d’ye-do ! ” jerked he. “ Good morning, Dick, good morning ! Brand, I have come to make a request. You have, perhaps, seen something of my controversy with Carrington ? ”

“ Yes, something,” smiled the Major. “ How you savants appear to love each other ! All about a dicky-bird, isn’t it—some wonderful species of quetzal ? You accept the stories about it——”

“Stories !” expostulated the other. “Surely my grounds for belief are sufficient. We have accounts of this marvellous bird from three different sources, while I got a coloured sketch of it from Ziert, whom I met at Antwerp.”

“Ziert, the botanist ?”

“Yes. I admit he is a casual observer outside his own subject, yet he is a man of world-wide integrity. Now, Brand, observe this sketch, and look at this tail feather. Does not the one seem to support the other ?”

The colour sketch displayed was made to depict a Central American quetzal of virgin whiteness, the wing and tail plumage of which were marked with delicate dottings of green and pink and amber, each spot having facets, giving all the appearance of inset gems.

“Beautiful !” nodded Major Brand. “I now understand why in your letters you referred to this bird as the Jewelled Quetzal. An apt description ; very apt indeed. . . . Ah, and this is one of the actual tail-feathers ?”

“Yes. Now, examine it carefully—make use of this powerful lens. Could any sane man suppose that feather to be faked ?”

There was a pause. Both Major Brand and Dick scrutinized the plume closely.

“Personally,” said the Major, “I should say it was all right, yet I don’t rule out the

other theory. Until I have seen the living bird I will keep an open mind. What do you mean to do ? ”

“ Brand,” was the deliberate answer, “ I am prepared, within reason, to spend any sum on this—I make you, in fact, an open offer. Will you take on this Quest ? ”

“ H’m.” The Major pursed his lips. “ Costa Rica, isn’t it ? ”

“ Yes, and the river Frio—the Pranzo country. Rash in the extreme, I make no bones of that. But I, at all events, should share your peril, for I should be one of your band. I do hope you won’t refuse. I remember our interesting talk on the subject of those forests and savannas. I remember how eager you seemed——”

“ Oh yes, yes, I should enjoy it all right. But—wait. Have you maps ? ”

“ The most authentic maps, marked by Ziert himself. He has been there three times.”

“ Indeed ! And come out alive ? ”

“ Without a scratch.”

“ Hum ! Then I don’t see why it shouldn’t be done again. Come in and have some lunch, anyhow. Afterwards we’ll see what can be fixed.”

“ *’Wari ! ’Wari !* ”

The interjections were quick, coming from Chiqui, the old native guide, who sat in the stern of the dug-out.

For some long time, in the deepest silence, the boat had been stealing up this dark river of Costa Rica, between sedgebanks and tropical forest trees which overhung on either side.

"What is it, Chiqui? What have you heard?" demanded Major Brand sharply.

"There are people in the forest, Señor," was the swift answer.

"What people? Do you mean——"

"Indians!"

The words were spoken in English, but the Carib boatmen caught their meaning, and put out the paddles in a flutter, as if to turn the craft at once and fly to safety. Only much bribery had induced them to venture thus far into the dreaded haunts of the Pranzos, and one note of danger was enough to start a panic.

The Major, both stern and persuasive, urged them to continue; but scarce another stroke was taken before the foliage parted, and there was a soft, cooing hiss above their heads.

An arrow! Before they could speak a perfect shower of curving shafts sped over them, and plunged into the water.

"We are surrounded!" cried Chiqui. "No, no, foolish ones! If you pull out from the

shadows you will be seen, and death will reach you! Right into the bank, quick! Señores, the guns! Have them ready!"

As yet the whirring arrows had not even touched the boat, which seemed to prove that they were being launched at a venture. The four white men—Major Brand, Sir Byall Maitland, Dick, and Tim O'Flannel—cocked their rifles as the dug-out came stationary in the sedge. Then, from right and left, came the crackling of the underbush, and Major Brand cried out, "Fire!"

The four shooting-pieces rattled and roared, so that the night-birds rose screeching from the jungle, and far away the rumbling note of a black baboon went up. Then a fierce howl arose from the hidden foes, and one of several vicious spears came hurtling into the boat.

The rifles blazed again, and right upon that came a hoarse cry from a Carib in the bows. An arrow had ripped his bare arm.

"Land at once!" cried Major Brand. "If we are to escape we must beat them off. The paddles! Press well into the bank! Now!"

A few of the pluckier natives responded, and next moment the Major had leapt boldly to the bank, and was crouching beneath the heavy gloom of the undergrowth. Dick and Tim O'Flannel were soon close beside him, to be

followed presently by Sir Byall Maitland, and at a word they emptied their barrels again.

There was a scuttering in the underscrub, and a tearing of the creepers on Tim O'Flannel's right. He leapt round, and so just missed the sweep of a machete which hummed past his shoulder. He fired at close quarters, being rewarded by a groan ; but next moment he had to club his gun to meet two other figures which came starting up at his very feet. He smote into the dimness with all his might, jostling back into Major Brand.

The latter, in the middle position, was terribly hard pressed. He, too, had been obliged to use his rifle as a cudgel, but he could not be certain in the shadows of what he actually did. The most he could do at first was to keep the thing rapidly swinging, homing the butt with a lumpy thud whenever a body got in the way. But this scheme was no good as the rush increased, and he dropped the gun to snatch forth his revolver.

A machete just shaved the Major's cheek and sliced at his coat-sleeve, but by that time a bullet had tumbled the savage wielder of it. The Major's weapon was a twelve-chambered shooter, fully charged. He blazed grimly away at the Indians, got a short respite after the seventh shot, and was able to whip back his rifle.

Meanwhile Dick Brand, flanking his father on the left, had chanced upon a clearer passage in the undergrowth, and had rashly followed this up, firing as he moved. There were yells in front of him after each report, and every sign of headlong retreat.

Realizing his foolish daring, he was about to slip back when a steely grasp fell upon his ankle, and he was plunged into a huge mass of convolvulus.

Though no real match for the man who had seized him, he made good use of the darkness, and fought doggedly for upwards of a minute. His breath used up, the young fellow was then dragged to the grass, and sinewy fingers flew to his throat.

Another moment, and Dick's life might have been throttled out of him, but the instinct of self-preservation prompted extreme action. His left hand fought with those at his neck, but his right hand plunged to his belt. He felt the haft of his hunting-knife, drew it, and struck hard. The clutch upon him instantly relaxed, and his unseen foe leapt away with the note of a wounded animal.

Dick struggled up, and his father's hand fell upon him.

"To the boat at once! Quick! We must get away. For the moment we have scared

these fellows off, and we must seize the chance."

The quaking Carib boatmen had turned the dug-out about, and they waited only for the four white men to scramble aboard before digging in their paddles and working fast down stream. Furiously they paddled for upwards of an hour, and then, streaming with perspiration, they were obliged to rest from sheer fatigue.

The Indian guide leaned towards his employer, and whispered anxiously, "Is the Señor now satisfied that the risks are too great to be faced?"

"Understand this," was the Major's firm reply; "I am determined not to leave this country till I have walked in that glade where the splendid quetzal is said to be found. And you have promised to lead me."

Chiqui made a gesture in the darkness. "I will keep my promise," he made answer; "but our Caribs are another thing. After this happening of to-night, no power on earth would tempt them to pursue the journey."

"Then some of us must go there on foot. Speak to them. It is better that we disembark now and camp till daybreak."

This order was carried out. Drawing up the dug-out, they crept into the fringe of the

forest ; and the paddlers, at Chiqui's direction, broke branches to form a *rameda*, a kind of lean-to shelter. Wounds were dressed, and there was a long, quiet council between the four adventurers before they ventured to think of sleep. One thing was clear—it was going to be war ! The luck thrice enjoyed by the Belgian botanist was not reserved for them. Still, they were by no means unprepared, for they were now in the region of age-old rites, and in a world of ancient cities. That the present aborigines, survivors of that past, still maintained some ancient rites was a matter quite beyond doubt ; and antipathy to intrusion was part of their religion.

Tim O'Flannel insisted on joining Chiqui in a first watch, and the others, having rigged mosquito nets, settled to get what rest they could.

New plans at daybreak were not long in being arranged. Major Brand, Dick, Chiqui, and Sir Byall proceeded on foot alone, leaving the Caribs where they were in charge of Tim O'Flannel.

The four hoped to return before nightfall. But——!

The night passed, and another day dawned, and still the venturesome quartette had failed to return.

Tim O'Flannel grew terribly anxious, with one dire query obsessing his mind—had his truant comrades fallen into the aborigines' hands? Tim, fretting, lingered about till mid-day, and then he consulted the Caribs. He pressed them, cajoled and threatened, till three of the stouter-hearted consented to join him in a search. Off they started at once, O'Flannel being a sufficiently good woodsman to be able to pick up a trail almost without fault.

Orchids and other gorgeous flowers brushed their faces; toucans, humming-birds, and other brilliant forest folk made the gay wilderness gayer. It was a wonderland through which they passed, but they were naturally in no mood to give it heed.

A savanna fringed by wild calabash trees was reached towards dusk, and as they stepped into it something of a dazzling white hue, with trailing plumes, swept past Tim's face and into the trees.

"The Jewelled Quetzal!" roared he. "By hokey—the Jewelled Quetzal!"

Scarcely believing his own words, Tim followed the bird's flight, and came upon several half-decayed trees standing together roped with flowering creepers. Attached to the broken forks were scores of baited bird-nets, such as Sir Byall Maitland always used. Indeed, some

smaller birds were actually caught, and these O'Flannel set free.

"Glory, then!" rejoiced he, "it's ourselves who have struck the proper trail. Wherever our friends be now, 'tis clear they reached as far as where Oi'm standin'. Now, don't ye tremmel like that. Come, we must be pressin' on!"

He led out of the savanna, but, within a few minutes, to his real alarm he came on trampled signs of a desperate struggle. The Caribs saw, too, and once again Tim had to employ all the blarney at his command.

Quakingly they followed, fearing the night—indeed, it was as the mantle of dark fell that Tim was attracted by an odd glow in the murk ahead, and later by a loud, thrumming noise, the latter becoming more and more distinct. Tim snatched his breath and, having gained an open stretch, broke onward almost at a run. The Caribs, fearful of being stranded, followed, and soon all were crouched at the brink of a narrow valley.

"Ochone, then! The heathen wretches!"

These words seemed wrung from Tim's lips, for his worst misgivings were realized. Like some garish *mise en scène* the whole thing was spread before him. Down in that valley was a native place of sacrifice—a *teocalli*—and two

fires burned at the foot of a pyramid of steps leading to an altar. Between the fires and a circle of native huts were gathered a great crowd of Pranzos, the ruddy gleams catching the points of their spears.

At the end of the evil-looking platform a couple of dim figures beat steadily upon a drum of tightened snakeskin, while upon the sacrificial stone, before a gaping image, was bound a form whose head was flung back and whose chin pointed upward.

Tim started aside with a dry gasp. "'Tis Masther Dick!" he breathed.

The three Caribs crouched beside him, horrified at the spectacle, and if they had taken to their heels at once it would not have been surprising. By the will of Fate, however, something of their own native spirit stirred within them, and somehow they did not hesitate to obey O'Flannel's swift command.

"Come!" he whispered. "We are four agin' a multitude, yet, shure, we must see what we can do! Look, there is scrub on the hill behind that platform that will give us cover. Come on—ivery man av ye!"

It was a blind, lurching run, but the ceaseless tattoo of the drum covered all noise of their approach. Hidden by the low bushes, they were half-way down the gentle slope when

the drumming suddenly ceased, giving place to a dead silence.

Tim O'Flannel and his Caribs halted the same instant. Was the awful thing to happen at this very moment? Were they just too late? Tim was now within a stone's-throw of the raised platform, and could see everything all too clearly. A tall Pranzo, with scarlet forehead burned by lime to a rusty red, stood before the bound and prostrate body of Dick Brand. The savage's one hand was raised as he addressed the attentive mob, and in the other hand lurked a knife.

Then a thrilling idea was flashed upon Tim O'Flannel's mind. The smoke from the two fires in the open suggested it. He perceived, by the direction it took, that a warm, steady breeze was sweeping down the valley behind the altar. And at the same moment he realized that the mass of scrub behind which he crouched was withered and dry as tinder.

He gave a quick word to the Caribs, and they all wormed steadily upward. Tim then pulled forth his watch-chain, at the end of which depended a metal case of vestas. Giving the others an atom of time in which to spread, Tim struck a first match and applied it to the thick, shrivelled ground-growth.

The effect was magical. The desperate

Irishman, bent on creating a panic among the savages who held his comrades prisoner, had dared to hope for just that and no more, but the actual effect of his scheme was little short of immense. Three crackling bursts of flame leaped into the night, tearing a fiery path downwards, and belching clouds of suffocating smoke.

Covered by this screen of vapour, Tim jumped from place to place, applying more and more vestas at every point where he halted. The Caribs did their part, too, and soon the sacrificial platform was hidden in a great, rolling flood of pungent smoke. Nor was that all. The four on the rise had done their work unseen, so that the stifling fumes seemed to sweep down upon the fanatic Indians as from the very heavens !

Terror seized them. Flinging aside their spears, they ran helter-skelter to escape the horror of it. All their age-old superstitions were thoroughly aroused. They were now as frightened children.

Shouting for the Caribs to remain at the back, O'Flannel stuffed a handkerchief full into his mouth, plunged into the firelit stench, and stumbled towards the altar. Finding the cords which bound the luckless Dick, he slashed through them with his hunting-knife, and

dragged him from where he lay half-choked. With smarting eyes Tim then tottered down the steps again, and so, almost carrying young Dick, got him to the higher air.

Once clear of the reek Tim fell flat, and lay there, his shoulders heaving, unmindful of all peril, greedy only for the deepest breaths his lungs could take. Dick, lying prone beside his rescuer, came back to a sense of things presently, and the pair struggled to their feet at one and the same time. The thick vapour urged them to make a further effort, and together they went scrambling up the slope, joining in with the awed Caribs, and so coming to a fresh halt.

O'Flannel gulped to moisten his scorched throat. "The masther?" he gasped then. "An' Sir Byall, an' Chiqui—where are they?"

"In one of those nearer huts!" was the panted reply.

"Which one—which? Can you lead the way there? It's we who must make an effort to rescue them!"

"Yes, yes!"

Dick stood up, rubbing his hot eyes and peering into the smoke-ridden valley. In this moment of strain he was at a loss, though he knew well enough that he had lain bound, together with his father, Sir Byall, and the

native guide, in a hovel quite near to the altar.

At that moment O'Flannel caught him by the arm and dragged him down. "The Indians!" was his whisper. "They're coming!"

The affair grew tense beyond telling. Recovered from their first stampede into the far shadows, the Pranzos were now coming back into the glow of the twin fires. Increasing in numbers every moment, these spectral forms commenced to swarm the hill.

"By the howly powers!" gasped O'Flannel, "it's them who must ha' seen us afther all! Wait, though, O'im wrong; it's the blazing scrub they're consarned with. Man, they're jumpin' right into it wi' bare feet. They must be mad!"

"No, it's the huts they're scared about," said Dick. "The huts on that side. Don't you see that the dead growth all but touches them? They are afraid the bamboo will catch, and that the whole settlement will be destroyed! See, they're fairly swooping up—every one of them!"

It was true. Every wild form which came into view raced for the same point, the later ones bearing with them mats, sticks, and even spears with which to beat out the fire.

"It's our very chance!" cried Dick. "Give

me the rifle, quick ! You've got your shooter ? ”

“ Faith, yes ! The Caribs had better stay here. Lead on at once ; O'im wid ye ! ”

Taking the descent in a wide circle, Dick gained the rear of the nearest hovel. O'Flannel was close behind, his revolver fast gripped, and they darted into the full glare of the light. From the opening of one hut Dick slipped to the next, and so on to the next. It was a truly hairbreadth business. At any moment a Pranzo might turn, detect the daring couple, and so bring the whole savage horde leaping upon them. But at the third entry Dick dived in, and O'Flannel followed, to find him already crouched on the floor.

“ Knife—sharp ! ” came his demand ; and as Tim passed his blade he just noted three forms bound and stretched there.

Tim, his weapon ready, kept a sharp look-out till Dick had cut them free, and then led the way out. Five minutes later they had joined the Caribs far up behind the smoke and fire.

Thus, in the deep blackness of the forest, the little party stole away, pressing along for upwards of an hour, when Sir Byall Maitland was forced to call a halt. In the first rush up the dip he had badly wrenched his ankle, and this had now grown so painful that he was

bound to give up for a bit. So a *rameda* was constructed, half the fugitive party remaining on guard whilst the other snatched a little rest.

When Sir Byall Maitland opened his eyes it was already broad daylight. As he crept from the shelter of branches he beheld Chiqui and the Caribs standing together in a waiting attitude. The others were not to be seen, and the collector immediately inquired for them.

"They have promised quickly to return, Señor," was the Indian's answer; "and directly they do so we must make all haste to depart. It happens that we have camped by the savanna where the bird-nets were set, and they have gone to inspect them. But if they are not quick in coming—ah, they are here!"

There was a soft patter, a crackle of leaves, and Dick Brand burst into view, bearing something which he held aloft in triumph.

The collector, after what had so terribly happened, would perhaps have been content to leave the country unsuccessful; but enthusiasm came flooding back as he saw what his young friend displayed.

"The Jewelled Quetzal!" he cried.

And the Jewelled Quetzal it was, gleaming like driven snow—a fine male bird, with pointed wings and streaming tail-coverts. Its jewelled

markings seemed really to glow against the ground of pure white plumage.

In the net carried by Tim O'Flannel were two hen-birds, smaller and less gorgeous. Major Brand had set a fly-catcher and a couple of woodpeckers at liberty ; most of the other snares he had found hanging loose or broken.

And so, the object of the expedition having been achieved, the little company started back, and were much relieved, some few hours later, to find the remaining Caribs still awaiting them near the boat. They embarked at once, and, unmolested further, got away back to civilization.

Mementoes of an awesome experience, the Jewelled Quetzals were carefully borne to England, and those were the very specimens which kinema experts presented afterwards to the public eye. This *rara avis* was not, however—as the newspapers boldly stated—"photographed at imminent risk in its native haunt." It was quietly filmed at Sir Byall Maitland's big tropical aviary in Essex, where two of the birds still live and thrive.

QUEST TWELVE

THE CAPTIVE OF SWAMP ISLAND

“ SAY, Dad, how would fifty thousand pounds do you ? ”

Major Brand looked up from the chart he was pricking as Dick burst into the cabin with this impetuous query.

“ Very nicely indeed, Dick,” smiled the Major ; “ but where’s it coming from ? Will it drop from the clouds, or shall we find it floating on the foam ? ”

“ I’m not quite sure. But listen.”

Dick flattened out a newspaper he carried, and began to read as follows :—

“ £50,000 REWARD.

“ WOOL KING’S HEIR LOST AT SEA.

“ About six weeks since, as every one knows, the schooner-yacht, *Mowkee*, bound from Honolulu to Sydney, met a hurricane when due east of the Fiji Islands. Aboard her was

Dennis Pollock, the young son of the millionaire rancher.

"The *Mowkee* broke up some fifteen miles off the coast of Mango. Three well-found boats got away with all on board. Two of these boats duly made land, but the third—and the one carrying young Pollock—has never been heard of to this day.

"Mr. John Pollock, however, still refuses to think of his son as dead, and he now offers the enormous reward of £50,000 for any information which will lead to the boy's recovery."

"There!" cried Dick, slapping down the news-sheet. "What do you think of it, Dad? Fifty thousand! As this paper says, it's an enormous sum—enough to share with the skipper and crew. Oughtn't we to make a Quest of it?"

"Yes, Dick," was the cool reply, "I *am* making a Quest of it."

"Eh!"

Dick stared, and his father laughed.

"I saw that announcement," went on the Major, "when we were in Honolulu, and that, to tell the truth, was why I chartered this old 'iron tank,' as you call her. Still, I had promised you a lazy cruise in the South Seas,

and I didn't forget that we allowed business to interfere with our last holiday voyage."

"Oh, you mean the affair of Kwali's treasure?"

"Just so. This time, thought I, there shall be no mention of Quest to Dick and Tim, but this problem of the millionaire's son will do to keep *me* amused. And, d'ye know, Dick, fate has dealt us a strange hand!"

"How?"

"Why, the foundered *Mowkee* was sailing from Honolulu to Sydney; so are we. She met a hurricane west of the Fijis; so did we. She was blown within fourteen miles of Mango; so were we! The only difference is that we haven't been wrecked yet. We're still limping along and trusting to pick up our course directly Mr. MacMurdie has got that gear to rights. But what strikes me is that the missing third boat of the *Mowkee* might have drifted just as we are drifting, and that the £50,000 prize may lie in our very track!"

Major Brand laughed. "A pretty day-dream," declared he. "Why, if—yes, skipper?"

The master of the ship, Captain Archer, had just appeared.

"Another biggish island, sir, fair on the starb'd bow. We shall pass within a cable's

length of her. One of the uncharted, I fancy, but she looks promising."

"Ah, you're thinking of our water supply?"

"Yes, sir."

Rising, Major Brand stepped out on the deck, and was at once conscious of an odd sensation. The sluggish airs which blew off the adjacent isle were torrid and sickly sweet. In general mould it was like a hundred other such islands, yet its fertility was astounding. Its every slope was smothered in verdure, which was of a dull, deep green. A kind of bluish haze, almost like steam, arose from the middle valley. About its coral breakwater the sea droned lazily.

"What do you make of it, skipper?" asked Major Brand.

"Can't tell, sir," answered the captain, sniffing. "Great big hothouse, I should say. Still, we must have water; our present stock is no better than bilge. And from the look of things you won't have to go far into *that* maze before finding some!"

"Then you'd better send Mr. Oliphant ashore with half a dozen men and the water breakers. Dick, you might go as well."

Number two boat was thereupon lowered away. The mate had chosen his men, and these, having set foot on the silvery strand,

were soon following him through the outer belt of palms. Young Dick Brand brought up the rear with an ancient carbine—ship's property—at the ready. Tim O'Flannel had been left on board.

Exotic vapours assailed their nostrils, pungent, though not actually obnoxious. These uprose from overgrown swamps which lurked on every side, and to circumvent which it was often necessary for them to return upon their tracks. Though moisture abounded, there had, as yet, been no sign of a fresh spring.

"We shall have to climb a bit," said Mr. Oliphant presently. "This dip attracted me, but it becomes no better than a quagmire."

Upward they toiled, panting in the hazy heat, their limbs for ever snared in the prolific herbage. Yams and taro thrived amid masses of tree-fern and hibiscus. Now and then a gleaming lizard would rush from under their feet. But there were no birds. An eerie silence prevailed everywhere—even the leaves did not rustle; but this unnatural quietude was at length broken by a gentle sound of splashing.

"Heaven be praised!" puffed Mr. Oliphant; and his henchmen, encouraged to a last stout effort, tore betwixt the highest and closest tangle to emerge upon a rocky clearing. This

was in form of a long, shallow scoop, deepening to the ravine, and along it coursed a gutter of crystal water fed by a sparkling waterfall.

Thankfully the party drank, accepting the gift at sight. They proceeded to fill their breakers to the brim ; but into the midst of this activity a high voice suddenly broke, startling them completely,—

“ Hands up, gentlemen ! ”

The expedition swung about to behold an alarming spectacle. A ring of men surrounded them—a ring of men so patched and scratched and burned that they looked more like savages than white folk. Only their rifles seemed cared for ; the levelled barrels of these glimmered in the sun. In the midst of them was a stiff, lean figure, more swarthy than the rest, whose most distinguishing mark was a solar topee tipped jauntily over one eye.

“ Come, gentlemen,” insisted he. “ Hands up, please.”

“ Who are you ? ” demanded the mate, recovering his composure.

“ My name is Vero. You have, perhaps, heard of me before.”

“ Vero ! You mean——”

“ Count Vero—exactly ! ” This with a cynical smile at the mate’s evident astonishment

"You are my prisoners," added he. "I advise you to submit quietly."

"That be hanged!" burst forth Dick Brand, and the hot-headed youth precipitated matters by snatching up his piece and firing point-blank at the sinewy spokesman. The shot was a bare miss. Purring through Vero's topee, it called out a snarled word. Instead of answering with a volley, however, the ragged brigade came leaping upon the *Diana's* men like so many wild beasts.

In a trice there was a tumbled mêlée, during the first shock of which the landing party were laid sprawling in the rivulet, with their foes kneeling atop of them. Absolutely unarmed, they had only their fists to rely upon, whereas the assailants were able to club their rifles.

The sailors, of course, rapidly had the worst of things, for they were outnumbered by two to one. A spirited dash for the scrub was strongly cut off, and menacing rifle-butts hustled the dogged little handful to the very brink of the ravine.

"Now," demanded Vero, a cloud of fury upon his face, "are you going to have done with this fooling? One word from me and my lads will fire; they will riddle you with bullets, and your bodies will pitch among the

banyans at the foot of that abyss. Do you surrender ? ”

“ What’s your game ? ” snapped back Mr. Oliphant.

“ That you will discover soon enough. We shall certainly kill you if you attempt any more nonsense ; but if you quietly obey us, not a man among you shall suffer.”

“ You swear that ? ”

“ I swear it.”

“ Very well, then. We have small choice in the matter. Lead on, and we will follow.”

“ Matters look serious—very serious indeed. What advice do you offer, captain ? ”

The skipper very solemnly shook his head. He stared long and deliberately at that isle of mystery lying now on the starboard beam, and he sniffed the steamy, slumbrous airs that it seemed to exhale. A second landing party had gone to seek the first—and neither had yet returned ! The skipper summed up his thoughts in one word,—

“ Swamps ! ”

“ Poisonous, do you mean ? ”

“ Mebbe, sir ; you never can tell. Some o’— ’Ullo ! ’Ullo ! What’s this ? ”

The old man stopped with a jerk, for through the fringe of distant palms a strange figure in

tattered ducks egressed suddenly, plunging headlong into the sea. With adroit, powerful strokes he began to swim towards the ship. It was not long before they had whipped out a line and hauled him aboard—a drenched, bedraggled catch.

“Yo’ boss ’ere?” gulped he, opening his mouth to show a vast cage of broken yet pearly teeth.

“I am,” answered Major Brand, “and here is the skipper. Fifteen of our crew have gone astray on that isle yonder. Do you bring tidings?”

“Sure, sah. It is fo’ dat I come.”

“Then step this way.”

The newcomer was of the negroid order, but, from the lightness of his skin, Major Brand judged him to be a mulatto. The man cast another anxious glance ashore before diving into the deck cabin towards which he was beckoned.

“I’se glad dey didn’t see me, sah,” panted he, dropping sodden as he was upon the bench. “My name Hosanna Smith. Dey don’t lub Hosanna on Swamp Island. Him too honest. No use for honest folk—not on Swamp Island.”

“Is the place inhabited, then?”

“Sure, sah.”

“Who rules there?”

“Count Vero.”

Captain Archer started. “What, the renegade and——”

“Sure, sah. Him bin hidin’ on Swamp Island ebber since how long. An’ a dozen odders wid him. All bad, sah. One day I go dere wid my boy Cæsar, gatherin’ copra. Dey seized us. Cæsar, him dey shoot bang cos he call Vero ‘dirty ruffian,’ sah. I say nothin’—I lie low, an’ wait my chance.”

“Well?”

“Vero, he grow tired o’ Swamp Island; bin hangin’ dere long enough. But he can’t risk signallin’ any ship fo’ fear ob bein’ reco’nized—must wait till he can steal one. Savvy?”

“You mean that his game is to try to steal ours?” demanded Major Brand.

“Sure, sah. ’Ow many men belong to dis ’ere steamer, sah?”

“Thirty-two, all told. Fifteen of those are now on the island. Tell me, has any harm been done to them?”

“No, sah. Vero, him rig bamboo stockade in middle ob de island. All yo’ messmates barred in dere. Yo’ see. Vero got only ’bout a dozen in ’is gang, an’ not much am’nition, so he can’t afford to fight. He work by cunning. Fust he capture eight men an’ lock dem safe away; den he collar second lot an’ shut

up *dem* same fashion. Now he waitin' for de rest ob you."

"Oh, and how does he expect to get us?"

"He size it all up proper. He tink yo' wait till mornin' in 'ope ob your fren's comin' back; den he expec' yo' to muster ebbery remainin' man, an' ebbery weapon, an' all come ashore to find out what's what. Vero, him lie in ambush wid 'is boys near de shore; den, d'reckly you'm waded in de bush, dey up, seize boats, row to empty ship, get up steam an' be off."

"A pretty scheme, upon my word! So you came here on purpose to upset it?"

"Sure, sah. Dey sen' me to collect shell-fish from de beds off lee shore, an' dat gib me my chance. I nebber do get back till after dark, so dey won't nebber guess I warn you."

Major Brand's brows were knit in a troubled frown. "Is there any ruse," demanded he, "by which we may set free our comrades and get away from this ugly place without having to fight for it?"

"Sure, sah—wid my help," answered the mulatto. "De bamboo stockade am near a narrow creek. I can guide yo' up dat creek d'reckly after dark, an' lead you froo de bush to palisade. Only one rascal on guard; we knock 'im on de head—*plonk!* Den we let

out yo' shipmates, an' all vamoose. Befo' you know it, we all be back 'ere—up anchor an' away ! ”

“ Shure, sor, it sounds a dale too aisy to come true,” grunted Tim O'Flannel, who had been called in.

“ Still, we must try it,” declared Major Brand, rising briskly to his feet. “ A really bold bid for it will very likely mean success.”

Night fell with tropical abruptness, and the *Diana's* two remaining boats, quietly lowered, were manned by all save Mr. MacMurdie and a stoker, who would keep the fires trimmed in order to be smartly away.

The oars were liberally muffled, and very soon, under Hosanna's directions, the yawning mouth of a ghostly creek had been warily entered. This creek dwindled rapidly, mangroves on either hand growing down so thickly as to form a well-nigh impenetrable wall. Fireflies flitted and glistened. The pungent humours of unseen bogs stole about them. Creepers linked overhead, and the air began to be dank and suffocating.

The boats, crawling one behind the other, ran several times aground, or fouled in a leathery webbing of twisted roots. By the utmost patience and labour these difficulties were overcome, till at last Hosanna gave the word to stop.

"Dis am de place," muttered he. "Out boat-hooks an' 'old on tight. I go ashore first an' see if way is all clear. As yo' lub yo' lives, don't go budge till I come back!"

"All right," agreed Major Brand. "Be as quick as you can."

"Sure, sah."

There was a wading gurgle as Hosanna clambered out and dived into the gloom of the leafage. No one, not even the hard-bitten O'Flannel, had doubted the mulatto's sincerity, and they did not happen to catch the wicked chuckle he uttered as he deftly skirted the hidden swamps, and so headed round at a lively pace towards the seashore.

Ten minutes later he burst from cover. Two boatloads of men awaited him in the shallows of the lagoon.

"Hosanna?" demanded a low voice.

"Sure! Dat Count Vero?"

"It is. Well, have you done your part?"

"I hab dat!" The mulatto laughed gloatingly. "I worked the stunt beau-ti-ful! Dey suck in my tale jest like a sponge. I left um up de creek—dey's waitin' dere fo' me!"

"Is the ship deserted, then?"

"All save two, sah—de engineer an' a fire-man. We'll soon lock *dem* up w'en we nip aboard!"

“ Good ! Hosanna, you’re a marvel. Come, jump in.”

The treacherous mulatto did so, and as he sank into the bows he found humped there a human bundle whose mouth was bandaged. Two smouldering eyes belonging to this bundle glared at Hosanna out of the murk.

“ Ha, ha ! ” chuckled the mulatto, giving this corded figure a prod. “ You ’s off to sea at last, sah. You ’s sure goin’ ’ome ! ”

That “ bamboo stockade ” spoken of by the precious Hosanna was entirely a myth. The kidnapped men of the *Diana*, as a matter of fact, had been marched across to the western hilly region of Swamp Island, and there shut up in a cramped and crabbed-shaped cavern. At the entombing of the second party, their gaolers had served them with an armful of raw fruit and a jar of watery kava.

“ I’d like to know what mischief’s brewing,” grumbled Dick Brand.

“ So would we all,” responded the mate. “ Anyhow, these beggars don’t mean to starve us ; that seems a good sign. Eat, friends, and drink—even if you cannot be merry. Wish I had a knife, though, to hack off some of this rind.”

“ I’ll lend you mine,” said one of the seamen.

"What! Didn't they empty your pockets?"

"No. I suppose they forgot that."

"Do you happen to have baccy on you, then —and matches?"

"Sure thing."

"Oh, bravo!"

Spirits went up at once. Given the consolation of tobacco, a sailorman can endure almost anything, and there were delighted murmurs when the blessings were handed round.

Dick Brand made no claim on the soothing weed, but he scooped up his share of the lucifers, and set himself on a tour of discovery.

The rock of the cavern, he found, was most weird in its formation, looking as though it had been fused at some time as a result of extraordinary heat, and so contorted into a hundred ghoulish shapes. There were follicles and fissures by the score, brittle to the touch, so that he contrived presently to scrape out a new passage.

The boy, with thudding pulses, crawled onward into an elusive twilight. He struck another match, and only in the nick of time. Beneath his chin now was a spiral chasm, boring clean down into the heart of the world. Another wriggle and he would have pitched into it.

Overhead the chimney appeared to continue.

On looking up, Dick was able to perceive a disc of brilliant sunlight.

He hastened back to the others, and in the course of two minutes the whole fifteen were knotted about that awesome shaft of nature which corkscrewed down and down.

"Volcanic," exclaimed Mr. Oliphant, and he pointed to the black caking of hardened lava. "Most of the Fijis are volcanic, and this must be the offshoot of a crater that burnt itself out ages ago. That," added he, peering aloft, "is what they call a fumarole."

"We can swarm up it—I'm sure we can," cried Dick. "Give me a leg. I shan't lose my knee-hold—and if I did no doubt you could catch me."

The ascent was simpler even than it appeared, for there was ample grip all the way, and a gentle bending of the fumarole helped towards the summit. Dick was soon out on a roof-slope of age-old ash and grit, about the base of which a jungle of harsh green scrub flowed upward like a climbing wave. Soon all the others had emerged, and the grateful airs of the Pacific came blowing to their faces.

"Well done, young sir!" voiced Mr. Oliphant. "Now, at all events, we are free men. But we carry our lives in our hands—remember that!"

Descending, they forced their way through a grove of huge trees, crowded with gay blooms, which the bos'n declared to be ironwood. A number of truncheons whittled from these provided accommodating weapons, and, thus armed, the adventurers debouched upon the shingle and commenced a scrambling detour.

A hundred checks were met with, and darkness was threatening when they were at length brought to a dead halt by a broad ten-knot current that gushed from impenetrable thickets on their right.

Hoping to find a narrower point for fording, they waded up the shelvings of this outpour, and so stumbled suddenly upon a dozen or so of native canoes, fitted with outrigger floats.

"We must use them," cried Mr. Oliphant. "This solves another of our difficulties, for the chances are quite strong that we should have found no boats awaiting us on the weather beach. All aboard, gentlemen—and out paddles!"

They hacked away the vegetable thongs that moored seven of these craft, there being two paddlers in each, with Mr. Oliphant lying flat in the prow of the foremost. During this operation the brief equatorial dusk had deepened to night, so that their tiny flotilla, readily shooting the current, launched out upon a darkening ocean.

At length the masts and rigging of the *Diana* became vaguely visible, and then her hull stood up, a solid shape in the enwrapping gloom. There were voices on her decks, and soon they caught the creaking chafe of pulley-blocks.

"*Diana*—ahoy!" shouted Mr. Oliphant, and as his voice rang out there was a prompt lull of talk. The newcomers were challenged in strange tones, and right upon that there was the blinding flash of a rifle. A spray of small shot lashed the waves just in front of the leading canoe.

"Keep off, or it will be the worse for you!" roared he who had fired. "This vessel's changed hands!"

Dick Brand uttered one sharp word beneath his breath; then, waking somewhat to the grim situation, he scrambled to his knees.

"Paddle near, lads!" cried he. "We've got to shin aboard and rush 'em. For your lives! Paddle in!"

His hearers, stung suddenly to excitement, complied with a will, and next minute the rude canoes had come cracking against the *Diana's* iron carcase.

Ordinarily the boarding of her from this level would have been a very awkward task indeed; but four boat-falls hanging from their davits offered a shining hope. Before those above

had divined what was intended, the gallant fifteen were upon the ropes and swarming aloft like monkeys.

A babel of cries broke forth, and several more shots were fired, but no harm resulted. Munitions were probably meagre ; for those rascals who now rushed to defend, though armed with divers pieces, made no motion to discharge them. Instead, they wheeled them through the air, and aimed prodigious blows at the first to swing up.

Mr. Oliphant encountered a fearsome drive on the collar-bone, which robbed him of his hold, and dropped him headlong to the boat below. A like thing befell Dick Brand, but in both cases this violent lurching upon the two heavily weighted falls caused the davits to spin inwards. Thus the boarders next below got a quick hold of the rails, and next breath they were up and astride them, using their ironwood bludgeons with terrific effect.

Blood was at boiling-point. The menace of losing their vessel and being stranded in a gehenna of swamps urged the sailors to stake all in this desperate fray. Besides—what had become of Major Brand, Captain Archer, and the rest ?

This last uncertainty, perhaps, and its sinister possibilities, was the thought which goaded

them most. Dick Brand, up from the water at last, and followed hard by Dimm the bos'n, won on to the deck amidships, and they stemmed the crush long enough for others to come panting beside them.

Dimm collapsed to a grievous crack on the cheek, while the residue, seven strong, plunged for the shelter of the galley, against which they planted their backs and turned afresh to face the enclosing mob. In the water, meanwhile, the remaining five swam from range of a Winchester that was in commission on the bridge.

"Round this way!" gasped the mate. "Let's try the bows."

Here the rusty cable, trailing from its hawse-pipe, gave them capital access. In a brace of shakes they were all up and tumbling over the forrard bollards, carrying a hearty rear rush upon the foe.

This served its timely purpose, for the first party, harried aft, must needs have gone under had not some such aid arrived. As it was, they could not keep their feet long, and the fray resolved itself into a perfectly mad scuffle over the engine-room gratings and into the port scuppers. "Finis" would have been written in one brief minute but for unexpected help.

"Stick at it, bhoys—stick at it!" urged Tim

O'Flannel's booming voice from below. " We're wid ye now ! "

Over the sides then came scaling a new contingent, fresh as paint, and with hearts for anything. Major Brand himself had rarely felt grimmer—and as for Tim O'Flannel he was in a terrific mood. The huge Irishman felt he had been out of events far too long, and never had he used his strength to more smashing purpose.

The adversary did not stay. Bruised as they were, jostled to the marrow, they had no stomach for the opening of new accounts. A brief moment did they waver, then as one man they chose the clear road aft, clattered over the poop, vaulted the taffrail, and so went thudding into the sea !

Never, possibly, had victory come on swifter wings. Major Brand and his stalwarts, growing uneasy at having to wait so long in that mangrove creek, and beginning to scent a hoax, had plumply decided, at the first sound of firing, to hasten back to the ship—and their advent had certainly turned the crisis.

Lanterns were briskly fetched, and the fruits of conflict examined without delay. Two of the enemy lay huddled abaft the companion, and another at the break of the poop. Over against a port stanchion stretched the unmov-

ing figure of a dark-haired man with a fierce, sallow face.

"Vero!" muttered Dick, "and shot. Queer! We, at all events, had nothing to shoot with. He must have intercepted some of his own lead; those rogues were firing pretty wild. I don't think a single one of our lads were grazed."

"No, but they've had their gruel, for all that," returned the skipper. "Mr. Oliphant's case appears to be the nastiest one. Let's get him berthed at once."

The mate, as they gently lifted him, showed signs of reviving, and at the foot of the ladder insisted on being able to walk. They turned down the gangway, Dick Brand marching ahead with a lantern. Arrived at the officers' cabins, he flung open a door and entered—to start back in bewilderment. On the bunk was the figure of a youth, whose wrists and ankles were firmly tied.

"Hullo!" observed he, coolly, struggling into a sitting posture. "How goes things?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Dennis Pollock."

"What! Are you the missing son of——"

"Australia's 'wool king'—exactly."

There was a moment's amazed silence.

"But—how on earth do you chance to be here?"

"That's painfully simple. Those fellows brought me off the island and dumped me in this bunk."

"You mean—you are somehow concerned in the plot?"

The young fellow grinned. "My good sir," replied he, "I *am* the plot. I was sailing in the *Mowkee* from Honolulu, and we were downed in a gale off Mango on the twenty-eighth——"

"Yes, yes," interposed Major Brand; "we know all about that. The boat containing you and a dozen others was supposed to have foundered."

"Well, it didn't. It was heaved in on the shoals of Swamp Island, whence somehow we hobbled ashore. We made a pretty feeble bunch of castaways, I can tell you, but the population came out, and took us in tow."

"The population?"

"Yes—Count Vero and a half-breed nigger called Hosanna Smith. They were a couple of scamps who fled the law, and were making their abode on that isle of morasses. Ugh! what a spot to live in! A few hours of those sickly odours turned me over. I was out of count for four days, reposing on a couch of pandanus leaves. When I awoke it was to find that Vero had hatched his plot. By the by, is Vero aboard here?"

"Yes—but shot."

"I'm not sorry. Well, I suppose I must have been a sore temptation to him, for my dear old governor's millions have been much in the air of late years. You spot the idea, no doubt. I was to be restored to my father in due course when Vero and Co. had squeezed as many thousands out of him as they possibly could."

"Ransom, eh?"

"That sort of thing. Much, of course, depended on fate. There being a crowd of them already in the scheme, they had no anxiety to co-opt more. So Vero's plan was to sit tight and wait till some craft might be pirated. Only now and again sails were sighted, for Swamp Island is quite out of the common run. But this morning your boat hove up, and for her they laid a bold snare. . . . Hullo! do I hear your engines being started?"

"Yes, we shall be off in five minutes or so. By the way, those plotters would have done quite well, for your father is offering fifty thousand pounds to the man who brings you home."

"Fifty thou— *Whew!*" Young Pollock laughed. "Good old Dad," cried he. "Now, I wonder if I'm worth it. Anyhow, you'll come in for that. Congratulations!"

Swamp Island now is no more than a stirring memory—one of many ; though Hosanna, the mulatto, and some of his fellow-spirits are perhaps exiles there to this day. A large part of the reward went to Captain Archer and his crew ; but Major Brand even then did so well out of this Quest that he felt induced to retire. His brother, Sir Philip, had pointed out to him that young Dick must one day succeed to the title, and it would scarcely do for the Master of Willard to be a gentleman rover.

This argument had its effect, and Major Brand's Quest announcements ceased to appear, though only the future can show how far our redoubtable trio, after years of wandering, will manage to "settle down." For the present Dick is at College, doing his dutiful best—yet the truth had better be told. Dick is a steady worker, painstaking, even keen—but not *quite* as keen in pursuit of knowledge as he was in Quest of Peril !

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